

ANC **IMAGINATION**

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

JUNE, 1954

35¢

**SLAVES TO THE
METAL HORDE**

by MILTON
LESSER



Introducing the

A U T H O R



William L. Hamling



IT'S been said many times that editors are frustrated writers.

If they are, I like to think that they're frustrated because they can't write enough! In that sense I frequently feel frustrated — my time is fiendishly preyed upon by editorial and production matters to the point where turning out a new fiction piece seems nothing but a tantalizing dream. And since I made my professional debut in science fiction as a writer some seventeen of my thirty-three summers ago, this frustration takes solid form every month when I sit down to write Madge's editorial and also answer letters in the Reader's section. At such times I vow that next month I'll get a new story written (and easily published!) but somehow next month fol-

lows the pattern of those previous. So for the sake of easing this frustration, let's call this the Editor's Story—for which he conveniently made room in this June issue of the World's best science fiction magazine!

The above statement will assure you of my complete lack of modesty, and that is true wherever Madge is concerned. The little lady is the love of my life and I am as proud and fond of her as I am of my family. This is understandable when I reflect that science fiction is not just a means of livelihood to me; science fiction is my major interest, both as a pastime and career. I am one person who sincerely would have preferred being born a century or two from

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The Editorial

YOU may have heard recently about the "Space Clock" developed by the Hamilton Watch Company. The clock was invented by Dr. I. M. Levitt, director of the Franklin Institute's Fels Planetarium, and co-sponsored by George P. Luckey, president of the Hamilton Watch Company. It was created to demonstrate differences between Earth time and that of other planets, specifically Mars, recording simultaneously the hours, date, month and year.

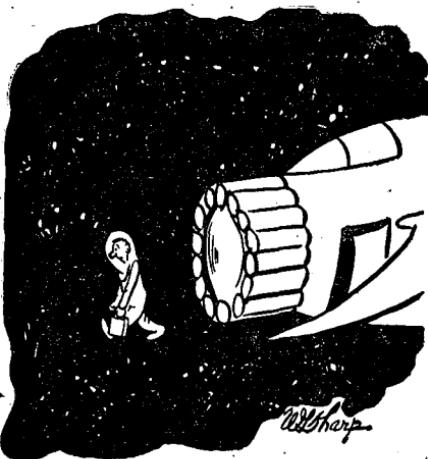
SPEAKING of the Space Clock, Dr. Levitt explains, "It is important as the first attempt to demonstrate the interplanetary time differentials a future space explorer must consider when planning journeys into outer space."

ANY WAY you look at it, this "scientific toy" has a great deal of significance. The obvious question we're inclined to ask is, why waste time developing something for which we have no practical use? The answer, we smugly contend, lies in the fact that space travel is just around the corner—something we're preaching constantly in science fiction.

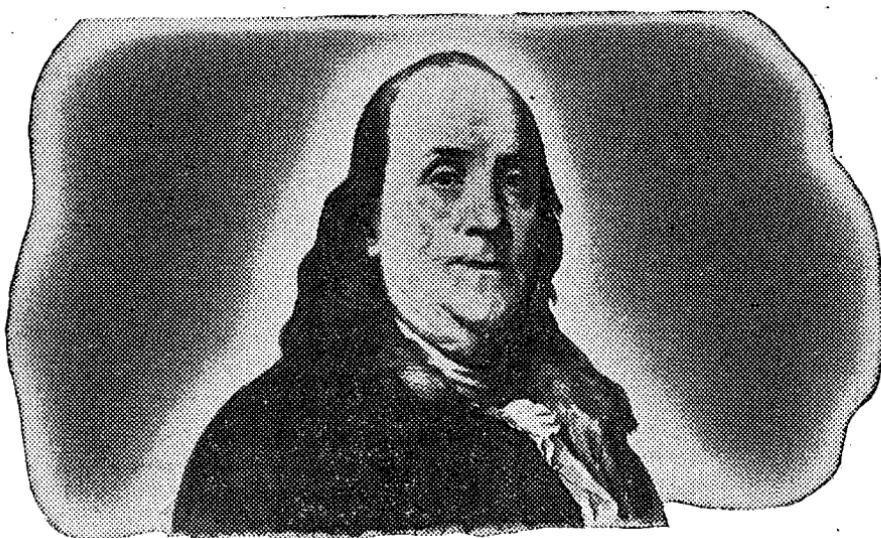
WE congratulate the Hamilton Watch Company for developing Dr. Levitt's invention. We also suggest that Hamilton watches in general are in for a big popular

sales rise in the near future. We constantly hear the advertising slogans such as, "This airline travels on Bulova time," and many others; but it seems that Hamilton has scooped the industry. Shortly they will be able to boast, "Earth-interplanetary flights run on Hamilton Space time!" Right, Mr. Luckey?

SPEAKING of Space, next month brings back popular Dwight V. Swain with a thrilling interplanetary novel, "The Terror Out of Space." So make sure you're at your favorite newsstand on time —check that Hamilton Space clock —May 27th. Accompanying the novel will be a McCauley cover that's right out of this world. See you there wh



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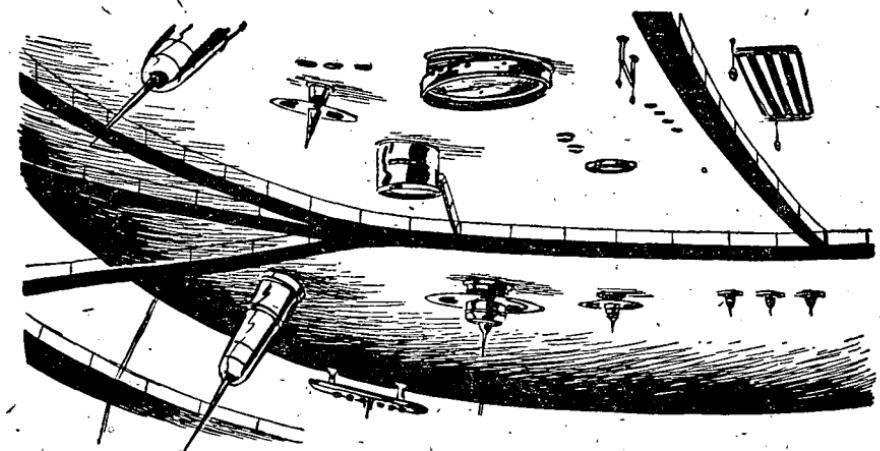
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Johnny Hope knew the robot armies had been created to serve Man. But war and a plague had destroyed civilization, leaving humans as —

Slaves To The Metal Horde

by

Milton Lesser.

JOHNNY Hope backed off warily, retreating toward the sun-dried creek bed, a jagged brown scar across the parched grassland. He carried no weapon and as the others closed in about him in a tightening semi-circle his eyes darted furtively in all directions. But all the faces were stamped, as from a mold, with un-

compromising hostility.

Johnny licked his lips and said, "I want to bury them. Let me bury them and then I'll go. I promise."

DeReggio, the mayor, brandished his club—which was an old rifle stock with half the jagged, corroded barrel forming a handle. "Go," he said. He took a long stride toward Johnny, then changed



his mind when the youth held his ground. "They cannot be buried, Johnny Hope. You know your parents must be burned as the law dictates."

Blinking sweat from his eyes, Johnny felt the sun scorching down through the glaring midsummer heat-haze. "It was the last wish of my father," he said softly, his voice hardly more than a whisper. "That I should take them forth from the village and bury them with a prayer for their Christian souls."

"No!" DeReggio bellowed. He was a great-chested man with sloping shoulders and almost no neck. "We cannot deliver their bodies to you. We cannot let you come back into Hamilton Village and take them, for you comforted them in their last hours and are therefore a victim of the Plague yourself." He pointed with the rifle stock toward the far hills, purple with distance. "Go."

Johnny shook his head, planting his feet firmly, wiping sweat-dampened hands on the worn fabric of his denim trousers. Then he held his palms up and said, "Where? Where is the Plague?"

"You've been contaminated."

Nearly the entire village had gathered behind their mayor now, and the mutterings were angry. When Johnny began to walk to-

ward them, his hands outstretched to show no plague scars marked their skin, someone hurled a stone. Instinctively, Johnny hunched his shoulder and caught the missile on his collar bone. It jarred him and left an angry red mark where the capillaries had burst beneath the skin.

Staggering back toward the creek bed, Johnny was felled by a fusillade of stones. He crouched on all fours at the edge of the dry brown earth, head spinning, vision blurring with pain. He expected more stones to usher in the final blackness, but when he could again see clearly, DeReggio's muscle-corded legs straddled him and the mayor cried, "Enough! Let Johnny Hope depart with his life." It was a brave gesture DeReggio had made, approaching within inches of Johnny, whose parents had been slain by the Plague. But DeReggio and Johnny's father had been close friends all their lives and had fought together in the last days of World War III before the Plague brought warfare—and civilization to an abrupt halt.

Johnny forced himself upright on trembling legs. "I thank you for my life," he said, "but not for how you treat your dead companion-in-arms."

The color drained from DeReggio's olive-skinned face. "Think

what you will, Johnny. Think it but go while you still can. And remember that our first concern is with the living. The dead are beyond recall and the Plague victims can spread carnage in their wake. You know I loved your father like a brother, and your mother . . . ”

DeReggio and Johnny's dead mother were cousins, had been raised together under the same roof in the long-gone days before the War. Except for Johnny himself, the death of his parents could have disturbed no one more than DeReggio.

“All right,” said Johnny. “I'll go.” There was a loud sucking in of breaths—relief—from the crowd. “But first I have this to say. I have visited the old, ruined cities. I have seen Philadelphia on its river and once I went north as far as New York, the great stumps of its buildings coming right down to the water's edge on the island called Manhattan. I have seen these things and although I am young I tell you this: we will not return to our greatness unless we strike out boldly instead of sitting, huddled in fear, at the thought of the Plague.”

“It is what his father always said,” someone whispered from the edge of the crowd.

“The Robots will cure the Plague,” someone else, a woman,

declared.

Johnny laughed and had never heard such a sound before, from his lips or any others. “The Robots will cure nothing,” he said. “Has anyone here ever seen the Robots?”

The faltering wave of sound from the crowd was in the negative.

“I have seen them,” Johnny told his people, with whom he could no longer live. “My father wanted it that way. He sent me to the cities and to the mysterious places between the cities, the gleaming, white-surfaced roads which we use no longer, to see the Robots. And I tell you this: they will not cure the Plague. If anything they'll spread it.”

A HUSHED silence fell, like a pall, on the assembly. None of them had ever seen the Robots, but that was because it is not proper for a mortal to see a deity. “This was the truth my father could not tell you in his lifetime,” Johnny went on. “He knew you would have laughed and mocked—or worse. In his death I tell it to you for him. Along with his wish to be interred in the ground, it was his final thought.”

DeReggio did not look Johnny squarely in the eye. “I think you had better go, lad. You have no right to talk like that.”

Johnny shrugged, feeling the

weight of a knowledge and wisdom beyond his years. "I am twenty-three," he said. "I was an infant when the War ended. Yet my father could teach me certain things and other things I could see for myself because he taught me to be curious and take nothing for granted. You could learn the same. Someday, perhaps . . . "

"By the Robots!" DeReggio swore softly, hissing the words almost in Johnny's ears. "Go before you antagonize them. If they start throwing things again, I won't be able to save you."

Johnny turned his back and squared his shoulders in a gesture compounded as much of defiance as contempt. He told DeReggio, "At least do one thing for me."

"If I can."

"When they are burned, say a prayer. One of the old prayers, if you remember." Johnny did not wait for an answer. He set forth in long strides, his sandal-shod feet powdering the sun-baked ridges on the dry creek bed. He did not once look back over his shoulder, but now, with the people gone and his pride no longer a barrier, he sobbed softly, thinking of his parents who had died because they had to venture forth from Hamilton Village to learn some of the truths which were hidden from their people, and so had come down with the Plague. Hours la-

ter, as the sun sank toward the western horizon and the heat of the day became less intense, Johnny heard the distant baying of dogs as the village hounds picked up his spoor and followed it. As prescribed by law, Mayor DeReggio was making certain Johnny did not double back to Hamilton Village.

He was alone in a hostile world which, in twenty years, had seen civilization come tumbling down like a house of cards in a hurricane.

THAT night, he slept uneasily on the bare ground, the soft-footed padding of foraging animals all around him under the dark moonless sky. He awoke with a tremendous hunger and a parching thirst. The latter he slaked in a swift-gushing stream which flowed clean and cool even in the heat of midsummer. Presently he came upon a huge black hawk, its pinions flapping, its talons sunk into the flesh of a dead cottontail rabbit as it prepared to fly off. Johnny waved his arms and shouted, frightening the bird of prey which rose without its breakfast, circled uncertainly, and then wheeled off to the east, a soaring black ghost graceful as a feather.

Johnny built a fire with brush and dry twigs and ate his meal in silence, feeling like a scavenger.

He drank again from the stream and began to fashion himself a spear by uprooting a sappling and ripping off its branches and rubbing its tapering top to a fine point on the edge of a small flat boulder. He hardened the point in the embers of his dying fire, hefted the makeshift weapon experimentally, and headed north in the general direction of New York.

Two days later the joints of his knees and elbows began to stiffen. It came upon him slowly and he thought it was from too much walking and not enough food, but when the stiffness spread to ankles, wrist and neck and giddiness struck him suddenly, he began to suspect the Plague.

It was early afternoon and he sat down at the base of a thick-trunked oak tree, propping himself against the bole. He hurled his useless spear away and wondered how long it would take before he sank into the final coma and death. He ran swollen fingers across his knees and realized they had puffed to twice their normal size. He could now feel nothing from his knees down, and it was an effort to move his hands. A faint purple color suffused his limbs and any doubt he may have harbored about the Plague vanished.

DeReggio was right. Johnny tried to rise and failed, rolling over helplessly to lie half in and

half out of the cooling shade shed by the oak. The chills rushed up from his feet, and engulfed him, followed at once by fever. By the time he began mumbling in delirium, the sun was going down in the west, casting long red cloud fingers into the darkening sky.

CHAPTER II

DIANE darted from the stream with a glad little cry, shaking the water from her long, tawny hair, the droplets of water sparkling on her bronzed skin like diamonds, the long, lithe lines of her body clothed only in the moisture until she found her buckskin shorts and halter and dressed. Life was comparatively simple and uncomplicated among the Shining Ones, and she, of all their encampment, remembered no other way. The others might look back with bitter longing or curse softly and futilely at the silver patches of skin at elbow and knee which marked them as survivors of the Plague, but not Diane.

So what if they were shunned by others, by the non-afflicted people who clung so doggedly to their mean existence in the small villages? She had but to hunt and fish and evade the bands of roving Robots lest they conscript her in their services. The only other bane in her life was Harry Starbuck and she could take care of herself

where he was concerned. She could . . .

Something stirred in the undergrowth to her left and Diane could barely make out the flash of skin which said it was a man and not an animal. She finished fastening her halter as if she had seen or heard nothing, then abruptly picked up her hunting knife and said, "I hear you in there. I'll count three and then come in after you."

She did not have to count. The bushes parted and Harry Starbuck emerged, his skin scratched by brambles, his boyish face ridiculously out of place atop an over-muscled body, his knees and elbows covered by buckskin guards, an affectation common among the Shining Ones but which Diane had always thought as silly as wearing eye patches because you did not like the color of your eyes.

"You were watching me," Diane said angrily. "I warned you before, Harry."

"There's no law," he boomed sullenly, his deep voice belonging to the over-developed body and not the boyish face. "I can go where I want to."

Diane slapped the flat of her knife against her palm slowly. "Someday, she predicted, "this blade is going to feast on Starbuck. I mean that."

Starbuck roared his laughter. "Then I'll be careful," he prom-

ised. "But meanwhile, you realize you can't marry anyone but a Shining One, and who of our people suits you more than . . ."

"None of them suit me."

"You're young. You have no family, no close friends to protect you. I should take you . . ."

Diane shrugged, then regretted it as Starbuck's small eyes feasted hungrily on the smooth play of muscle beneath the taut, bronzed skin. "Then go ahead, Harry. But you won't sleep nights, because I'll be waiting and if you do sleep you can forget all about waking up. I mean that, too."

Starbuck was still laughing. "I've half a mind to turn you over to the Robots and let them tame you a little before I claim what I want."

Diane let her voice do the shrugging. "You can always try."

"Must we always argue?" Starbuck demanded abruptly, petulance drawing down the corners of his lips. "I don't want to fight with you. I want to . . ."

"I know what you want. You can forget it. I'm going to take a walk and maybe do some hunting. If you'll excuse me."

"With a knife."

"I'm not hunting for wild horses."

"I think I'll go with you."

Diane scowled at him, then girdled her knife. "As you wish, but

be quiet."

Grinning, Starbuck shortened his strides and matched her pace as she cut away from the stream and the undergrowth and headed toward the foothills of the Pocono Mountains in the distance, where plump, juicy rabbits hid behind every blade of grass.

THEY walked in silence, the man's steps ponderous, the girl's so quick and lithe her bare feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. In an hour they had reached another stream, wider than the first and running deep with swift, cool water. Diane immediately dived in and swam, then continued walking on the other side while Starbuck carefully searched out a ford and splashed across with the water up to his waist. By the time he overtook Diane she was crouching, sitting on her bare heels, the line of her back, damp under the buckskins, a long, graceful curve.

"Take a look at this," she said, and pointed.

Starbuck looked and saw the remains of a camp fire at her feet. "Warm?" he asked.

Diane shook her head. "But not completely cold. Several hours old. Probably made this morning. Probably there's someone nearby."

"So what?"

"So if he's alone he's probably a Shining One and . . ."

"We have enough people in our camp now."

"You always think competitively, Harry. One more man won't hurt your position in our tribe."

"Well, if he's young and if he . . . well, if you . . .".

"I'm not promised to you or anyone, and don't forget that. Besides, it doesn't have a thing to do with this." Diane peered expertly at the ground and soon picked up the stranger's spoor where he had come out of the stream himself—probably after bathing—and started out on his day's journey.

"Come on," she said and Starbuck could either forgo her company or follow her.

He followed.

The spoor became erratic. It wandered in circles, doubled back on itself, seemed either headed for no goal or incapable of reaching one. "He must have been hurt somehow," Diane mused. "He can't be very far."

"What are you so curious about?"

"Curious? I don't know. I'm just interested. I—Hello! Up there."

Diane sprinted up a short rise, leaving a surprised Starbuck pounding along several paces behind her. She found the man lying, face down near a large oak tree. Although it was comparatively cool, his body was drenched

IMAGINATION

with perspiration. Diane shook her head sadly at the swollen joints and purple discolorations.

"They say it's a terrible thing," she told Starbuck as he panted up. "I don't remember; I was a baby."

Starbuck shuddered. "I remember. Watch out, don't go near him."

"What's the matter with you? We're immune."

Starbuck nodded morosely. "Yes. Immune. But he'll die anyway, so why don't we . . ."

"Why don't we take him back with us, that's what. Don't kid me, Harry Starbuck. You're acting sympathetic only because you think I'll like that. Well, I happen to feel sorry for this man. I think we'll feel better if we help him."

"Help him? He's as good as dead."

"Are you dead? You had the Plague. Am I?"

"No, but maybe one out of a hundred live. That isn't much of a chance for him."

"It's a chance, though. Here, carry him."

"What? Who, me? Now listen, Diane . . ."

Maybe a moon-struck Starbuck had his advantages. "Suit yourself, but don't expect me to speak to you again, ever."

Starbuck considered this, then mumbled something under his breath which Diane could not

hear. "All right," he said finally. "But I'm telling you it's a waste of time."

"I'll be the judge of that."

STILL grumbling, Starbuck picked the man up by one arm and one leg, staggered until he balanced his burden across one shoulder, then started back down toward the stream.

"That's right," said Diane. "We could reach camp in a few hours if we hurry."

"He'll never live through the day," said Starbuck. "I only had the Plague a few years ago. I lived in the villages, so I know. He'll never live through the day."

"Just keep walking. If he dies, we can bury him."

By the time they reached the stream again, Starbuck was covered with sweat. He forded the water carefully, Diane behind him to keep the stricken man's head above water. Despite its fever-flush, she liked the man's face. He was young, not much older than Diane herself, with dark hair and regular features; neither too boyish like Starbuck's, nor too craggy like most of the older men she knew.

Occasionally the man would mutter something unintelligible, and when they got to the other side of the stream he opened his eyes, stared at Diane without seeing her

and said in a croaking whisper, "Water."

They stopped. Starbuck dropped his burden thankfully. "I can't carry him all the way back," he said.

"Then don't. Go ahead. I'll stay here." Diane cupped some water in her hand, trickled it between the dry lips. She was not even aware of Starbuck when he left.

She made a bed of leaves for the man's head and studied him. The denim trousers suggested village life, but she never suspected otherwise. The face still appealed to her, strong in appearance despite the fever, yet not overbearing. She hoped the youth would recover. "This is fantastic," Diane said aloud. "It may take days before he recovers . . . or dies." She thought of calling to Starbuck before he retreated beyond earshot, but her pride forbade that.

Shrugging and making herself as comfortable as she could, she bathed the man's flushed face with water.

DAY and night, the touch of the ground, the cool water which bathed him, the patient hands which kept the blood flowing through his swollen joints—all became as unreal to Johnny Hope as the shadowy remembrance of some half-forgotten nightmare. His lu-

cid moments were few: there was this person, face unseen but comforting; there was a little food and all the water he wanted; and there was the fever which came and departed, leaving an icy chill behind.

Once Johnny mumbled, "Go away. You'll catch it yourself." And there was laughter, soft-murmuring, feminine, he thought. Was the woman insane to expose herself so?

The fever retreated stubbornly, in no great hurry to depart. The lucid moments became more frequent and of longer duration. The girl was beautiful.

There came a time when Johnny sat up weakly, his back propped against the bole of a tree. The face smiled at him. He willed the toes of his left foot to move and watched them wiggle. He could just barely feel them.

With long, easy strokes, the girl massaged his legs. Acutely conscious of her now, Johnny was embarrassed. "I'm all right," he said. He struggled to sit up but as yet had no real control over his limbs.

The girl placed the flat of her palm against his chest and pushed gently, easing him back against the tree. "You stay still," she told him. "You'll be up and around in a day or so, but don't hurry things."

"I ought to thank you. You're crazy. Why did you expose yourself like this? Why . . . ?"

He watched her as she sat before him and drew her legs up, knees thrust up. He saw the slim-bronzed line of her calves and the metallic silver of knees.

"A Shining One!" he cried, recoiling involuntarily. The Shining Ones had survived the Plague, but remained carriers of it for all their days.

The girl smiled at him. "As are you. You're a very lucky young man to live through this."

The silver coated his own knees; Johnny saw, and his elbows. It would take some adjustment. All his life he had been told to walk in fear of the Shining Ones, who often swept down on the villages, forcing the townsfolk to flee or face the Plague, and taking what they wanted of the stores of food and supplies.

"I see you're a little afraid of yourself. It's common enough. I was lucky to have the Plague as an infant. I remember no other life, you see. When you're well and strong enough to walk, I'll take you back to our encampment."

"I don't know," Johnny said doubtfully.

"Just be patient with yourself. Adjustment will come."

"All my life they said the Shining Ones were monsters. When I

was a little boy I had to be good because my mother said otherwise; the Shining Ones would come and get me, carrying me off to kill me with the Plague."

"You've had the Plague yourself. You've got to remember that. Besides," the girl laughed easily, "you're a big boy now to believe in bogey men."

"Well," Johnny continued stubbornly, "there are other things. The Shining Ones are scavengers. They don't work themselves or grow their own crops. Instead they invade the peaceful villages. Then the natives, my people, have to flee or become contaminated. The Shining Ones take all the loot they want?"

"Some of us. I have been a Shining One all my life but have never taken part in such a raid. We do not grow crops because we are not an agricultural people. We are nomadic and hunters."

"Why?"

"The Robots," the girl told him. "Some of our people join them voluntarily, many others are forced into bondage. If we don't keep on the move, they'll find us. Agriculture is an impossible art when your encampment is always on the move."

It gave Johnny food for thought, and something of the girl's own frankness made him do his thinking aloud. "If I remain alone, I'll

be a hermit. I've seen the hermit Shining Ones wandering through the hills, alone and friendless, wild men: If I go with you, I become almost an enemy of my own people."

"They are no longer your people. You must realize that."

"And if I go with you, I can learn about the Robots and perhaps one day bring the truth back to my people. Tell me, do the Robots cure the Plague or spread it?"

"They spread it."

Johnny smiled grimly. "I will go with you."

TWO days and half a dozen good meals later, the girl helped him to his feet and nursed him along for his first few uncertain steps. But strength flowed back into his legs rapidly. He was walking without support by the time they reached the wide stream and saw the girl's nod of silent approval as he swam across it with her, matching swift stroke for stroke.

An hour went by and Johnny became amazed at the speed of his recovery. He almost wanted to return to Hamilton Village and shout, "See? I survived. I'm back." But he was a Shining One, a carrier, forever an exile from the people and the life he knew. And his own parents were dead, mute

testimony of the havoc he might wreak among his people if he returned to them.

They walked from the stream and shook the water from themselves and looked at each other, wet like that, and smiled. "I don't even know your name," said Johnny.

"It's Diane."

"I'm Johnny Hope. I want to —"

"Johnny! Get down!"

He stood there, surprised, staring foolishly. They were on a small rise of ground above the stream. The girl, who had fallen flat even as she hissed the command at him, was tugging at his legs. He dropped prone beside her, although he still failed to see the reason for her sudden alarm. She parted the undergrowth in front of them with her hands and said the one word, "Look."

Johnny had never seen the Robots this close before. For all their ungainly bulk they trod the ground softly, walking as he had always seen them at greater distances, in a long, single file column. They were huge antenna-topped creatures, their great cylindrical head sections bigger than a man and gleaming a polished silver-blue, their eyes, four of them evenly spaced around the cylinder a foot or so below the antenna, white and bulging, with neither pupil nor

lid, their limbs many-jointed and metallic, various tool-ends fastened securely instead of hands. The legs were attached to the small body, but one fifth the size of the head; the arms came from the head itself, just below the unblinking eyes.

"They must be twelve feet tall," Johnny whispered.

"Shh! Softly. We're close to our encampment and I don't want them to find us. They average twelve feet, Johnny."

JOHNNY would never forget the sight. Many times he had watched the robots parading in thin-lined silence down the long, silent roads which men no longer used, but now he could have almost reached out and touched them. The absolute quiet was unnerving. The Robots must have weighed close to a ton each but walked with the stillness of stalking jungle cats.

"Where are they going, Diane?"

"I don't know. Who understands the ways of Robots? Who can say" Abruptly, Diane was still. Her eyes went big and wide but she wasn't watching the Robots.

Directly in front of her face and staring at her from unblinking eyes, its body half-coiled and dappled with the sunlight which filtered down through the foliage,

was a copperhead. The tongue darted out in a quick, blurring red streak, the head cleared the loose coils and swayed slightly from side to side.

"Don't move," Johnny barely formed the words with his lips and hoped Diane would retain her presence of mind and obey him. A sudden motion would set the snake to striking.

The file of robots paraded by just in front of them, an occasional joint creaking, metal skins polished to keen reflection. The copperhead was fully coiled now, head cocked flat and ugly and perfectly still. Johnny placed his hand on Diane's thigh and let it crawl upwards, as if of its own volition, with an agonizing lack of speed. Now his fingers had reached the edge of the buckskin shorts and now they climbed on the smooth pelt. He could feel Diane trembling faintly, the motion unseen but felt. And now his fingers climbed to the girdling belt, grasped the haft of the hunting knife, slowly withdrew it, tiny fraction of an inch at a time.

At last he had drawn the knife clear, easing it slowly toward his own body. He balanced it on his palm, trying to judge the weight. He would have only one chance, for the quick motion of his arm would make the copperhead strike if he missed.

Sweat rolled down his forehead and into his eyes, half blinding him. He cursed soundlessly, held his hand out flat, squinted, whipped it forward. A sigh escaped Diane's lips.

There was an angry thrashing as the copperhead uncoiled. But the blade had pinned it to the ground, piercing the body just below the flat head. Ignoring the column of Robots now, Johnny crawled forward swiftly, grasped the knife and drew it cleanly toward him. The head was severed from the body. The body thrashed furiously, then lay still in death. The Robots marched on, oblivious of the drama which had unfolded at their metal-clawed feet.

The last Robot glided by, the long line retreated into the woodland, vanished.

Diane stood up, still trembling. "It took me three days to save your life," she said. "You saved mine in seconds."

Johnny handed her the knife. "Let's find your people," he said.

CHAPTER III

IT was Harry Starbuck who met them when they emerged from a long, winding defile overgrown with vegetation. The defile opened into a depression, perhaps half a mile wide, surrounded on all sides by low hills, steep-sloped and

blue green with pine. Unless the Robots happened upon the almost hidden defile, Diane's Shining Ones could not have selected a better hiding place for their present encampment.

Starbuck greeted Diane with, "In this case you had more luck than brains. I see he has survived."

"He's one of us now."

When she said that, Johnny looked down at his silver knees self-consciously. In time, he hoped, he would grow accustomed to it. But right now he felt himself somehow between two worlds, divorced from his own people but not ready to accept the nomadic existence of the Shining Ones.

Starbuck grinned without humor. "Well, then he's in time to help us move, although I'm opposed to it."

"To what?" Diane demanded angrily. "To Johnny? That's just too bad."

"Will you let me finish? Not to Johnny, if that's his name. To the move. Keleher has decided we have to move because a band of Robots trooped through earlier today. Maybe you saw them."

"We certainly did," Diane informed him.

"Well, I don't like it. Every time the Robots pass we have to start all over. What's so bad about the Robots anyway? They never bother us, do they?"

"They conscript us, whether we

like it or not."

"Well, what of it? Rumor has it the conscriptees live like kings anyhow. We've got nothing to fear from the Robots."

"That's a matter of opinion, Harry."

At that moment, another man joined them. Johnny hardly had time to realize that he did not like the man named Harry. The newcomer was a big man, bigger than DeReggio, with huge shoulders almost three feet across and a long mane of graying hair almost reaching them. He wore a beard, spade-shaped and also gray, and covered his legs not with the expected buckskin but with khaki trousers he had probably stolen from one of the villages.

He greeted Diane briefly, then said, "Starbuck here told me how you were going to nurse a Plague victim back to health. Is this the man?"

Diane nodded and Keleher stuck out a powerful hand which Johnny pumped vigorously. "Glad to have you with us, son. In time you'll learn we're not the monsters you were led to believe all your life. But mark me—you owe your allegiance to us henceforth—provided you decide to stay." Johnny did not have to be introduced: Starbuck had mentioned a man named Keleher as their leader, and the newcomer spoke not with the blus-

ter and arrogance of a leader unsure of his position, but with the calm, self-assurance of a respected and powerful chieftain. Keleher would make a first-rate friend but a terrible enemy.

"He'll stay," Diane spoke for Johnny. "He doesn't look like a hermit, does he?"

"Never can tell. Where are you from, son?"

"Hamilton Village."

Keleher's smile was wry, almost rueful. "Will you put in with us?"

"I guess so."

Keleher shrugged, then took Diane aside and whispered to her. After that the big man turned and walked away. Diane was quiet.

"What's the matter?" Johnny wanted to know. "Does he always smile like that?"

"No, Johnny."

"Then tell me."

"We're going to leave this area because of the Robots. Starbuck already told you that. We're going to travel light but we're still going to restock some of our supplies for the journey."

"I still don't see—"

"I don't know how to tell you this. The nearest village is Hamilton."

"So?"

"So, we're going to raid it. We're going to raid your village, Johnny."

STARBUCK'S laughter carried through the entire encampment of conical tents, each flying its clan-standard from the central ridge pole.

Johnny wanted to hit the man, then realized he would be striking out at his own mixed up emotions. Diane was staring at him with genuine sympathy, but that hardly helped. She said, "What are you going to do, Johnny?"

"I'm not sure yet. I have to think."

"Remember, you're one of us now. Any time you doubt that, look at your knees or elbows. You are a Shining One, make no mistake."

"Yes, a Shining One." But Hamilton Village had been his home.

"We don't harm anyone," Diane explained. "I told you I take no part in the raids. I don't know why, for they're harmless."

"I saw one once, when I was a young boy. Before my people came to Hamilton Village to build their homes. The Shining Ones came down from the hills and simply walked into the village. There was no resistance. Our sentries gave us warning, but it hardly helped. We packed what we could and fled, leaving most of our supplies and equipment behind, leaving an entire village which we had called home but which we could

never see again. The Shining Ones contaminate."

"Yes—we do. You do. The villagers can't fight us. We could walk down there unarmed and take what we want. Maybe that's why I prefer to hunt instead. I'm not sure, Johnny. What are *you* going to do?" She took his hand impulsively in hers and squeezed it. They hardly knew each other but they had saved each other's life.

"I wish I knew." He withdrew his hand awkwardly. He liked Diane, perhaps too much. But until he made up his mind she was a potential enemy.

Soon Keleher returned to them, not alone this time. A dozen men crowded behind him and others were leaving the tents of the various clans to join them. "Did you tell me his name?" Keleher asked Diane.

"No. He's Johnny Hope."

"Well, Hope, get a good meal under your belt and we're off. We leave for Hamilton Village later this afternoon. You ought to be able to tell us exactly where to find whatever we want once we get there."

Could a man change his allegiance overnight because he now was different physically? Johnny's heart was still in Hamilton, even if he had been stoned from the Village and his parents had been burned, as prescribed by law. But

the rest of his life he would be a Shining One.

For a time he watched while Diane fixed his venison dinner, savoring the rich, gamey aroma. Then he slipped silently from the encampment.

Often DeReggio would come to the large boulder half a mile north of Hamilton Village and sun himself contentedly, forgetting for the time at least the problems of his office. This rock was no secret. Any villager, not finding DeReggio in Hamilton itself, would know where to look for him.

Now he had almost drifted off into slumber. He always found this half-awake time most pleasant for dreaming. Then he could conjure visions of the old days, of the lost cities with the beat of their traffic pulse and the winking kaleidoscope of their electric lights, and the driving madness of their people which kept them seething with activity around the clock. He never traveled to the deserted cities himself as youngsters like Johnny Hope did, because their crumbling masonry and bomb-scarred streets saddened him. And besides, the Robots had taken over many of the cities and since no one had ever bothered to tabulate them, you were never sure when a city was deserted and when it was not. Better to dream of the old days...

"DeReggio! Wake up."

It was Sheldon Hope, his old comrade-in-arms, who had fought halfway across a world with him while civilization crumbled to ruin all about them.

"Shel . . . Shell, boy."

"Wake up, DeReggio. It's Johnny Hope."

DeReggio sat bolt-upright, circles of light floating on blackness before his eyes from too much sun. "Johnny! Go away. They'll kill you if they find you here. Are you crazy? Keep away from me." DeReggio stood up and backed off, watching Johnny. "You have no business coming here. You—"

DeReggio saw the shining knees, the silver elbows. "The Plague. You survived it. You're a—"

"Shining One," Johnny finished for him as the mayor's voice trailed off.

"A carrier, that's even worse."

"I was hoping I would find you here. I knew I couldn't go down into Hamilton. You haven't much time."

"What are you talking about?"

"Shining Ones," Johnny said quickly. "Hundreds of them coming to raid Hamilton Village. They are on their way now. You'll have to leave, but I thought if I warned you you could have some time to take your belongings."

DeReggio accepted the fact without question but with

sadness: He shook his head from side to side, thinking of the neatly laid out streets, the small, compact bungalows, the field planted with hay for the cattle, with grain, asparagus, beans and tall corn waving green in the summer sun, ready for harvest.

"How much time do we have?"

"Four or five hours, I think."

"We'll have to hurry." DeReggio was already trotting back down the trail toward Hamilton, Johnny maintaining the pace with him but hanging back half a dozen long strides.

"I want to see the village once more, then I'll go."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. The Shining Ones want me to stay with them, but I had to warn you. If they find out . . ."

"For my people, I thank you, Johnny."

First person plural. My people. Johnny no longer was included. If the Shining Ones discovered his treachery, he would indeed be homeless. He wondered what Diane would think.

"Look at the Village and then go, Johnny. If they find you, I won't be able to do a thing. And I wanted to tell you, I said the prayer."

A figure appeared on the path up ahead. As he came closer the man's face was familiar, but his

name eluded Johnny. "Mayor DeReggio!" he called. "I wanted to tell you my wife thinks . . ." His voice trailed off. He scuffed his feet in the dust of the path and squinted. "Johnny Hope!" he cried. "By the Robots, keep away. I have a wife and children."

"I only wanted to see Hamilton once more."

"We don't care what you wanted."

"He brought a warning," Mayor DeReggio explained. "The Shining ones are coming."

The man held his distance, but spat on the ground in disgust. "Look at him? You heed his warning? Look. He's a Shining One himself. It's some kind of a trick you've fallen for."

DeReggio shrugged hopelessly. "You'll have to go Johnny."

Already the man was sprinting back down the path toward Hamilton. "I'll bring some of my friends," he called back over his shoulder. "We'll see about this. We'll see if a damned Shining One can go parading around Hamilton Village any time he wants. And you've got some explaining to do, DeReggio."

Then the man was gone. DeReggio turned to Johnny, almost shaking hands with him from force of habit, then drawing away in self-conscious confusion. "Good luck, boy. We'll be moving, des-

pite what Lawford said. Don't try to follow us."

"I hope I haven't got you into any trouble."

"It won't be the first time."

"Thanks for the prayer. They would have liked that."

When DeReggio looked up, Johnny Hope had vanished into the woods.

STARBUCK led one party of Shining Ones toward Hamilton from the north while Keleher took the main band in from the east. They never reached the Village though. Each leader saw the black pall of smoke rising long before he reached Hamilton. Each knew the Village had been put to the torch.

They met on high ground northeast of the flaming town and watched the fire, fanned by a strong summer wind, burn itself to embers and leave the charred skeleton of a village behind it.

"They got word," Starbuck said, waiting for Keleher to draw his own conclusions.

"It's happened before, but now—has anybody seen the new man, Johnny Hope?"

None of their followers had even heard of him.

"Diane would know," Starbuck suggested.

"She rarely joins our raiding parties." And Keleher checked, but

as he suspected, Diane was not present. "Well, we move on empty handed. Starbuck, you take your men back to the encampment and round up stragglers or anyone who remained behind. We'll wait here."

"You're as bad as the people of Hamilton. Always on the run. I don't mean to argue, but—"

"Then don't. Men who want to be conscripted by the Robots are free to leave our encampment at any time, get that straight. But I don't want forced conscription of all of us, Starbuck. Understand? The Robots are around."

"Well, I was just letting you know how I felt. What about Johnny Hope?"

"Time enough to see about him later, if he's still with the encampment. Naturally, if he's guilty he won't go unpunished."

"If he's guilty?"

"That's what I said."

"You're growing soft, Keleher."

"Yes? We don't elect our leaders, Starbuck. Any time you think you want the job, you can try to take it."

Starbuck blanched. "I didn't mean it that way. I was only giving my opinion."

"Don't, unless you're prepared to defend it—and yourself."

"I'm sorry." But Starbuck's eyes were smouldering.

"Get back to the encampment,

then. I'll expect you here with the rest of our people day after tomorrow. Can't make up your mind where you belong, can you?" Keleher pointed with amusement to the buckskin kneepads.

"I know you're trying to goad me," Starbuck whined.

"Maybe."

"You don't like me."

"As a type, Starbuck. Personally, I'm indifferent."

That was goading of a more subtle sort, but it was lost on Starbuck. Diane's indifference would irk him; Keleher's indifference was at times preferable. "We ought to be friends," Starbuck boomed. "I'm generally recognized as your second in command."

"Only because I want it that way. Amos Westler, for example has forgotten more than you will ever learn."

"That's clever," declared Starbuck. "That's expert. You play us off one against another and keep the power for yourself."

Keleher shrugged massive shoulders. "It wasn't original with me. But you're unusually perceptive today, Starbuck. And I'll say this: you've got more spunk than Westler, for all his brains."

"He's soft."

"You bring our people. I'll wait. Tell your men that since they have to pack our tents and cart our belongings, they'll be able to rest

when we reach our new encampment. My group will set the place up."

"He ought to be a hermit, that Amos Westler."

Keleher shook his head. "Too scholarly. No outdoor know-how. Give him a book and he's happy. He wouldn't last a week. But he's still a good man, Starbuck. We need men like Amos Westler."

"And we need men like me."

Keleher grinned. "You should have let me say that. Trouble with you is you try to ape me. I'm always a step ahead of you, though. And don't forget it."

"Maybe someday I'll catch up."

"That would be interesting," admitted Keleher, dismissing Starbuck with a shrug and issuing instructions as his men began to assemble their bivouac.

Starbuck sensed he had been bested in the verbal battle, but was too petulantly egotistical to admit it even to himself. Instead, he made plans for his return to the encampment. He hoped the new Shining One, that Johnny Hope kid who Diane had nursed back to health, would be foolish enough to return. Without Keleher around to steal the show, Starbuck might make himself a hero.

IF it weren't for the tawny-haired girl who had saved his life, Johnny Hope never would have

returned to the encampment of the Shining Ones. He left DeReggio with the intention of again heading north toward New York, but his way led him close by the encampment and he remembered the sudden touch of the girl's hand and before that the vision of her face, lovely and comforting, while he burned with the fever. Calling himself a fool, he entered the encampment warily, half-expecting a dozen men to leap at him with the word traitor on their lips.

But the camp was almost deserted and no one paid him any heed. He found Diane returning from the hunt with a small deer, its antlers not yet branching, slung across her shoulders. She dropped the dead animal with a happy shout and ran to Johnny.

"I'm so glad you're back."

"I'm glad to see you, too."

Then the smile left her face. "Did you—warn them?"

Johnny considered his answer. Well, he had returned because he wanted to see the girl. It would be senseless if he were not honest with her. "I had to," he said.

She nodded slowly. "It isn't hard for me to understand. They were your people. But tell me, does anyone know?"

"I'm not sure. When they find the village deserted and probably burned, though, they'll know."

"Yes," Diane agreed with him,

then snapped her fingers. "But not if I say you were with me all the time. See, you even went out hunting with me. We caught this fawn together."

"You'd be lying to protect me. You may get yourself into trouble."

"How? It's my word against a lot of guessing."

"I can't let you take the chance."

"It's no chance at all. I want to do it. I want you to be one of us, Johnny. We all don't raid the villages. I don't raid them, do I?"

"No, but I—"

"But nothing. You came back here, didn't you? No one forced you."

"I came back to see you, I guess."

"Well, you're going to stay with us. A man wasn't meant to live alone like a hermit. Here." Diane took his hand and led him forward, "you can stay in my tent for now. It would be silly to build yourself one since we're going to move the encampment as soon as Keleher returns from the raid."

"I can't—I mean—"

"Can't, nothing. I'm a good girl, Johnny Hope. Make no mistakes. Touch me at night and I'll scream. But I trust you. I like you."

Her frankness was both charming and unnerving. He wanted to say he liked her too, but

could not bring himself to utter the words. Instead he slipped his arm about her waist and walked with her to the tent, where she skinned the fawn expertly and prepared it for cooking. By then Johnny was sound asleep and did not wake up until Diane stirred him and offered him a platter of tender young venison.

SHORTLY after noon the next day, Starbuck returned with his men. Those who had remained behind were disappointed because the raiding party had come back empty-handed. Starbuck wasted no time adding fuel to the fire. "Has anyone seen that traitor, Johnny Hope?" he demanded.

"You mean the new man, the one Diane brought?" someone asked him. "He's here."

"The ingrate, the dirty ingrate," Starbuck boomed so all the encampment heard him. "One of us saved his life and first chance he gets he turns traitor. Next thing you know he'll want us to be conscripted by the Robots."

"You should talk," Diane cried as she and Johnny emerged from her tent. "You're always talking about how nice it would be to live with the Robots. Johnny Hope isn't like that at all."

Starbuck raised a finger to his lips and whispered, "Keep it quiet. If they hear about this, they'll

lynch Johnny."

"All of a sudden you want to keep it quiet," Diane hissed at him.

"That's right, softly."

"Well, for your information, Johnny was with me all along. We went hunting yesterday, just the two of us. Didn't we, Johnny?"

Johnny mumbled something under his breath and waited for Starbuck to speak. Suddenly the man was shouting again. He slapped Diane on the shoulder, smiled, roared: "Thank you, Diane, thank you. I thought so. Did you all hear her? Diane told me she saw this man sneak off to warn Hamilton Village yesterday."

"That's a rotten lie!" Diane cried.

But Starbuck smiled blandly. "That's all right. I know you didn't want him to know you told me, but there's nothing to worry about. You all heard her, didn't you?"

"We heard her whispering something to you," one of the men admitted.

"She whispered because she didn't want the traitor to hear. She was afraid. She should have known we'd protect her. I'm surprised at you, Diane."

For answer, she flew at him with her knife. He laughed softly, so softly that only she heard it. A shocked look appeared on his face as he parried the blow, twisted

her arm up; spun her around and held her that way while she writhed helplessly and dropped the knife to the ground. "I don't know what's the matter with you," he said. He still looked shocked.

"That should be proof enough," she panted. "I never told Starbuck what he claims."

"If you're covering up I can only assume you went with him. I am deeply shocked."

"I did not go with him. I was hunting."

"Then you admit he went!"

"I didn't admit anything. You are hurting me."

Starbuck's big hand had twisted her wrist painfully. He gave no indication of letting her go.

"She said you're hurting her," Johnny snarled. "Let her go!"

"I'm all right," Diane said.

Starbuck was going to let her go, but Johnny did not wait. He circled Starbuck's arm with his hand and wrenched until the bigger man bellowed and released Diane.

"Good," Johnny said. "I have no fight with you, but—" He had turned to look at Diane when Starbuck's balled fist slammed against the side of his jaw, knocking him down.

HE sat there dazed, uncomprehending because he had not seen the blow coming. But Star-

buck stood above him, fists clenched, and that was enough to tell him. "I still have no fight with you," Johnny said softly. He thought he could have taken the bigger man and at this moment could think of nothing he would rather do, but Starbuck had already accused Diane of being his accomplice and he did not want to involve the girl further. He hoped Starbuck would be content to boast about this one-punch victory instead.

"Scared?" Starbuck leered down at him, prodding his ribs with one foot.

"Get up and punch his teeth in," Diane pleaded.

But Johnny remained sitting on the ground, and shook his head. He explored his jaw gingerly with the fingers of one hand as if the thought of rising to take more of the same frightened him. His time of reckoning with Starbuck would come, he promised himself but now wasn't the time, not when it might involve Diane.

"You're not going to sit there?" Diane insisted. "Don't just sit there!"

Johnny shrugged. "Fighting him won't prove anything." He climbed to his feet and retreated out of Starbuck's range. He was the picture of abject cowardice and hoped it would inflate Starbuck's ego sufficiently to make him for-

get the charges he had brought against Diane. Starbuck was smiling smugly and booming something about letting Keleher decide what to do about Johnny Hope after they moved the encampment. But when Johnny stalked away from him toward Diane, calling her name, she presented him only with a stiff, haughty back and by the time he reached the tent the flap was down and tied securely. Johnny heard sobbing from within.

A few moments later Starbuck and another man came and led him to a different tent where he remained under guard until the encampment had been broken, the tents and equipment packed and ready to move, the people assembled in the square clearing which now was dotted with folded tents and bedding rolls.

"Let's move it!" Starbuck roared in his booming voice. The men stooped for their burdens, the few horses carried three and four times their normal loads. Starbuck waved the group forward dramatically, aware of his moment and making the most of it. They marched double-file into the narrow ravine and were soon well on their way toward where Keleher waited.

CHAPTER IV

63-17-B was twenty years old, but a trip to the repair bays every time

he returned to New York City kept his beryl-steel body gleaming as if it had rolled but yesterday from the assembly lines. Now 63-17-B could sense a stiffness in the second joint of his left leg and suspected corrosion. He was looking forward with keen anticipation to the time, in the near future, when he would stretch out in the repair bay and have his worn parts exchanged.

That, however, was not on his primary level of thought. While not unique with 63-17-B, the secondary level was not universal among the robots, for the idea of individual sentience had crept into the original plans only accidentally. On his primary level of thought, 63-17-B was in closer rapport with Central Intelligence than the three-hundred robots stretched out in a long, sun-reflecting line behind him. Like Central Intelligence itself, and unlike the few humans who thought of such things, 63-17-B believed that matter and energy are not merely components of one another but are actually the same thing. Thus he explained his greater primary level of thought by saying that the energy-matter bridge connecting him with Central Intelligence, invisible but measurable in quanta as was his body, was stronger than most. On the social level, this gave 63-17-B leadership of the three-hundred.

IMAGINATION

Thought-quanta crackled back and forth between 63-17-B and Central Intelligence in New York and, as on all such occasions, 63-17-B was not sure how much of the conversation reached the other Robots. "Hamilton Village is aflame," 63-17-B thought.

"Did you fire it?" The answer was immediate—and angry.

"Certainly not. We arrived too late to prevent it."

"Yet your scouts reported the Village was going to move out. You know a moving Village may or may not remain together. As often as not, it separates into small bands, which will spread out and find their way to distant communities. An ideal means of spreading the Plague, although I need not remind you of that."

"I am aware—"

"The error is unpardonable, unless the Villagers have not yet fled."

"Unfortunately, they have."

"Then another opportunity slips through our fingers. 63-17-B, upon your return you are to report to the Intelligence bays for a re-examination of your rapport synapses."

"But—"

"But nothing." The thought-communication crackled to silence.

63-17-B made the mental equivalent of a sigh. Such re-examinations, he knew from bitter exper-

ience, were shams. Re-shuffling was more like it. At a whim of Central Intelligence he might become nothing but a second-class Robot. On the surface, Intelligence would discover a flaw in his synapses. Actually, Intelligence would produce the flaw and pass his mantle of leadership down the line to some other Robot.

Sullenly, 63-17-B called a halt. Like all Robots, he was vindictive. Constructed originally as machines of war, the Robots had had revenge built into their mind-patterns as a strong factor. Actually, second-class Robots were not aware of this. The feelings merely existed and they acted accordingly. But 63-17-B was only too acutely aware: it pained him. The Robots had never actually functioned as machines of war, for the War had taken a bacteriological turn before the mechanical infantry could march off to battle.

The Robots had been stored as useless while disease swept Earth—with the development of the Plague itself making all further fighting impossible on an international scale. But the Plague got out of hand, 63-17-B remembered dimly. The slightest contact meant almost certain contamination and mankind prepared grimly for the end of its brief dominion over the Earth — until someone thought of the Robots. Let them

cure the Plague; the antidote was known, they merely had to apply it. 63-17-B's memory coils tightened angrily. Until that time, the Robots had been slighted, although they had waited patiently to serve their masters. Masters, indeed. 63-17-B recognized the vindictive pattern of his thoughts for what it was: mankind had had its chance, had failed. After man, the Robots. It was as simple as that.

But now 63-17-B was seething. He'd been advancing steadily in the Robot-hierarchy and had even expected himself to be assigned to Central Intelligence itself before too long. Because the impetuous people of Hamilton Village had set their city to the torch before he could arrive, all was lost.

He scanned the surrounding countryside with photo-retinal cells. Far below, just leaving the edge of the burning town, were a pair of stragglers—man and woman, he thought, but couldn't be sure at this distance. Well, revenge on two individuals would be better than nothing . . .

Strong hauling ropes were prepared, and now 63-17-B could see the figures were not two, but three. Since his photo-retinal cells could not perceive color except as shades of black and white, he had no way of telling the three figures were not Villagers but Shining Ones.

“WE'RE approaching Hamilton Village,” said Starbuck over his shoulder as Diane overtook him at the head of the column to get her first look at the place. “You can see the flames.”

“I thought you said the fire was almost out when you left Keleher and the others.”

“I did, but you can't predict those things. Apparently it has started again. See?”

They had reached a rise of ground and could see what was left of the village in a broad valley below them, a great pall of black smoke rising from it sluggishly. Starbuck saw something else a few miles off to the north, but said nothing. It was a long, thin column, gleaming metallically. At this distance he could not be sure, but it looked like a line of Robots.

“Keleher and the others are close by,” Starbuck said mechanically. He was not thinking of Keleher. The trouble with this group of Shining Ones was, no one understood Starbuck. Not only were his talents for leadership unappreciated, he was actually made fun of. He'd been sullen ever since his mental rebuff at the hands of Keleher. He'd acted inconsistently. His anger had been a free-floating thing, and he'd very nearly got Diane in trouble for it.

That was ridiculous. The an-

swer seemed obvious enough: if one is not appreciated in a particular place, one should go elsewhere. There was Thomas Burwood, a youngster whose father had been chief before Keleher and who had been killed by Keleher. Burwood almost certainly would join Starbuck. And Diane could be taken by force if necessary.

Starbuck put the stocky man named Gilbert in charge of the column and sought out Burwood. He found the younger man on a fringe of the column, plodding listlessly along.

"Listen, Tom," said Starbuck in a confidential voice. "We've often talked about life among the Robots, but we're letting our years fritter away. What would you do if the opportunity presented itself?"

Like Starbuck himself, Burwood was an over-sized young man given to fits of temperament. "What's the use?" he said. "You can't just walk into the Robot Citadel. They would kill you first and ask questions afterwards."

"No, but you could join Robots in the field. It's done that way most of the time, since the Robots venture forth either to spread the Plague or gain conscripts among the Shining Ones." Starbuck whispered in his best confidential voice, "And, Tom, there's a group of Robots two or three miles from here right now. What

do you say to that?"

"Let me think." Burwood frowned. "I don't know. It's one thing to talk about it but another to—"

"Keleher didn't give your father a chance to think, did he? Not when your father was growing old and Keleher knew he could take him. He killed him, struck him down like an animal, don't forget that, Tom."

"That's true, but—"

"You're worrying about life among the Robots, are you? From every rumor I've heard, you can live like a king, like the days before World War III ruined our civilization. What do you say, Tom? An opportunity like this doesn't often come."

"Well—"

"Of course, if you're afraid . . . but I thought you were made of the same stuff as your father, the only leader I have ever served faithfully."

"That's enough, Harry!" Young Burwood's voice broke. "I'll go with you."

"I knew you would. You're just like your father, Tom: There's one thing I want to do first . . ." The two whispered together for a time, then, Starbuck drifted back toward the rear of the column and permitted himself to straggle until he was out of sight of the rear guard, first making arrangements for the prisoner, Johnny Hope, to

be taken off the trail into the woods. Tom Burwood, meanwhile, double-timed up toward the head of the column.

“DIANE, I was looking for you.”

“Hello, Tom. What is it?”

“Some one wants to see you. Rear of the column.”

“Who?” All through their march, Diane had wanted to make her peace with Johnny Hope, but the opportunity had never presented itself.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” Burwood told her slyly, and winked.

“Is it Johnny Hope?”

Burwood smiled affably. “I can’t say. Please, Diane. I was only told to fetch you. It’s been arranged temporarily, but he can’t remain back there indefinitely.”

“I’m coming. Lead the way,” Diane said eagerly, and fell into step with Burwood. Johnny Hope must have had his reasons for not fighting with Starbuck. He was not the cowardly type, unless Diane had suddenly become a bad judge of people. Perhaps he thought, in some strange way, he was protecting her . . .

“Where is he, Tom? I don’t see anyone.”

“A little further.”

“But we’ve already left the column.”

“Just around that clump of

trees, I think.”

Something rustled in the undergrowth. “Johnny?” Diane called expectantly.

He stepped out into the trail and faced her. It was Harry Starbuck.

“What kind of a joke is this?” Diane demanded angrily, turning to rejoin the column. “I thought I was coming back here to meet Johnny Hope.”

Burwood laughed easily. “I never said that.”

“Well, whatever you’re planning you can count me out. Of all the nerve, bringing me back here like this—”

“Would you like to see Johnny Hope alive?” Starbuck asked in a conversational tone.

“What do you mean by that?”

“That you had better cooperate with me, Diane. The three of us are leaving the column now, you, Tom and I. If you don’t, I can’t guarantee anything about Johnny Hope.”

Diane did not know whether to believe him or not, but would hardly endanger Johnny Hope’s life on a notion. “I’ll go with you,” she said.

Less than an hour later, they approached the vanguard of the file of Robots. Burwood and Diane saw them at the same time, contempt filling Diane’s eyes as she began to understand what had

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been on Starbuck's mind. Fear was there too, threatening to unnerve her at any moment, but the scorn she felt for Starbuck prevented it from overpowering her. "Of all the cheap tricks," she said. "You—you wanted to join the Robots, but you also wanted me. Johnny Hope was never in any danger. It was all a lie, to get me here. Well, if you think I'm going with you—" Diane crouched abruptly, came up with a handful of dry earth and flung it at Starbuck's face, blinding him. Then she began to run.

"Get her, Burwood!" Starbuck roared. "Don't let her escape."

It wasn't Burwood's fight, but if he had thrown in with Starbuck he wanted to remain in the man's good graces, at least until he could figure things out for himself. Besides, his first sight of the Robots had almost choked him with fear. Chasing Diane would take his mind off them. He set out after her, aware that a still half-blinded Starbuck was circling around in another direction.

Diane guessed her best chance for escape would lie along the very edge of the file of Robots. She did not relish the idea, but she had seen the look on Burwood's face when the creatures of metal had appeared and figured he would be loathe to follow her in that direction.

Did the Robots see her? She ran

in their direction, her clothing catching and tearing on the undergrowth. She neared the head of the file, could hear Burwood stumbling along behind her. The metal figures stood there, unmoving—watching her? Each one twelve feet tall, they could have stamped her to death.

BEHIND her, Diane heard a hoarse scream. She whirled instinctively, lost her footing, fell. One of the Robots had taken Burwood, who was thrashing and kicking helplessly as it bore him aloft and held him feet pounding on air, two yards off the ground.

She didn't like Burwood, but she had nothing against him. He screamed again, his voice breaking.

"Put him down," Diane shouted. She might as well have been talking to the ingots from which the Robots had been fashioned for all the heed they paid her. She whirled again, sought Starbuck, couldn't find him. Starbuck always talked of the Robots, perhaps he knew how to communicate with them.

Now the Robot had set a trembling Burwood down on the ground. Now a great noose of rope was drawn about his neck, its other end slung over the branch of a huge, bare-limbed tree. Now . . .

Something neither warm nor cold touched Diane, grasped her

about the middle, lifted her. It was a nightmare. It was unreal, not happening to her. The ground spun giddily, all vision receded behind a wave of vertigo, then returned, still spinning.

Diane clawed at the metal head, at the hard, unblinking eyes, scraping uselessly. She might as well try to scrape down the side of a mountain with her fingernails.

Burwood was hanging.

Feet dangling, arms bound behind him, he twisted and writhed in his last death agony. Diane shuddered, turning away, striking her head sharply against the hard metal of the Robot. When her vision cleared again, she was on the ground, another Robot stalking soundlessly toward her for all its great bulk, a noose identical to the one from which Burwood dangled suspended from its metal hand.

But the scene had changed; Diane realized wildly. A great airship, a rocket, had landed midway between the file of Robots and the burning village. Yaguely, she remembered that Starbuck had once said only Robots from the Citadel itself used the rockets, since only a few remained from man's last great War.

Starbuck was nearby, shaking but holding his ground, shouting at the Robots as if his very life depended on it. And, Diane thought

despairingly, it did.

"Leave her be!" Starbuck cried. "You're making a terrible mistake. We're not from the village. We're Shining Ones. We're Shining Ones, I tell you. We came here to join you, to be conscripted. We want to work for the Robots. See, we're Shining Ones!"

Did they understand? Diane couldn't tell. The Robots with the noose reached down and grabbed her, drawing her aloft again. She wanted to scream, but all her energy could bring forth only a whimper. She wanted to shut her eyes tightly and wake up, trembling but otherwise all right, in her tent. She could feel a lurching motion as the Robot began to move.

Burwood hung slackly now, twisting gently from side to side, like a rag doll, with the motion of the rope. Diane fainted.

Within half an hour, all the Robots had filed into their waiting ship. It blasted skyward on a jet of flame which was all but lost against the fires which consumed Hamilton Village.

CHAPTER V

"**W**ILL Harry Starbuck please step forth and make his report?" One of Keleher's assistants brought the command to the Shining Ones who had

joined the larger group near Hamilton Village.

There was a silence.

"Where is Starbuck?"

No one knew. The assistant shook his head and returned to Keleher for further instructions. Had anyone seen Starbuck? A short while ago, yes. Not for the past hour, though. Keleher next called for Diane, who had found Johnny Hope, the alleged traitor, along with Starbuck.

Some of them had seen her marching toward the rear of the column with Tom Burwood not long since. She did not answer the summons. And Burwood could not be found anywhere.

"Is everyone going crazy?" Keleher stormed. "Fetch the prisoner himself. We'll see what's going on."

Moments later: "Hope, charges have been brought against you concerning our raid on Hamilton Village."

"I know all about the charges. I refuse to discuss them now."

Keleher smiled without mirth.

"You—refuse?"

"They were looking for Diane. They couldn't find her. They were looking for Starbuck too, and couldn't find him. It is Starbuck who has made the accusation, so we'll have to wait until he's found. I don't care one way or the other about Starbuck, but I want to find

Diane."

Plump Gilbert came forward, said, "I may be able to shed some light on this. After Starbuck gave me charge of the column he conferred with Tom Burwood for a time, then disappeared. But Burwood whispered something to Diane and she joined him, heading for the rear of the column."

"You see?" Johnny demanded. "Starbuck went someplace with Diane. From the looks of it, she was tricked into going with him."

"Mere supposition," said Keleher; "although I wouldn't trust Starbuck particularly."

"Listen," Johnny went on, "that girl saved my life. I want to find her. Since you can't try my case until Starbuck is found, let me look for them and—"

"How do we know you will return?"

"My word," said Johnny, but the look on Keleher's face said that would never satisfy him.

"If the lad promises and if meanwhile he cannot be tried . . ." began Gilbert.

"When I want your advice, I'll ask for it," Keleher said curtly. "The boy stays here."

"But he merely wants to find Diane," persisted Gilbert.

"Enough. If someone thinks to depose me, let him try. Meanwhile, I command here. The boy stays. He will be considered inno-

cent until we can bring him to trial, but he will not be permitted to leave the encampment."

"Her life may be in danger," Johnny said grimly.

"I doubt it. I have given my orders."

"They don't satisfy me," Johnny told Keleher bluntly. "Am I to be regarded as prisoner, or member of the community until my trial?"

"You are one of us, a Shining One, until proven guilty. It is the way of our law."

"In that case," Johnny informed him, "I challenge your right to rule. I would depose you." Even as he spoke the words, Johnny doubted their wisdom. Keleher was large and powerful; Johnny had recently recovered from the Plague and did not feel fully himself. Still, he had to find Diane, and if there was no other way . . .

Keleher was grinning. "Perhaps you do not know what that entails. I'll admit, it's primitive. Upon your challenge we fight. Not with weapons, Johnny Hope. With our bare hands. Call it a peculiarity of mine, but I prefer brute strength. It is as if civilization, in closing its book for mankind, has put men like me in its stead. The ballot, the tribunal, the town meeting — all these are sophistications leading ultimately back along the road to civilization. If that means anoth-

er war and a worse one, I want no part of it. Small communities, living by mean strength, fighting for their existence tooth and nail, can't start a civilization growing.

"The level I want to maintain is physical, brutal, elemental. Knowing that, do you still challenge my right?" Keleher folded huge-muscled arms across his massive chest and stared with scorn at Johnny. "Well?"

"I was aware of that. The answer is yes."

"Then we can start making arrangements for the time and place. Would you prefer it on our journey before we reach a new permanent encampment, or after we have arrived to set up camp? You still look pale from your time with the Plague, my young friend."

"I prefer it right here," Johnny said. "I can't wait. Right here, and right now."

The sudden complete silence was broken by Keleher's explosive laughter as he unbuckled his weapon-belt and let it fall with knife and club to the ground.

“WHAT do you think, Diane?"

"Don't speak to me. I think it was a dirty trick, but I should have expected it from you. And you let Tom Burwood die, too."

I couldn't do anything about that," Starbuck protested. "I tried.

By the time I got through to them, Burwood was already dead. As it is, I saved your life."

"For this?" Diane gestured around her scornfully, to take in the tiny cubicle aboard the rocket which they occupied. After depositing them within it ten minutes before, the Robots had ignored them.

"I'm surprised at you. Have some patience, Diane. Someday you'll be grateful I took you along. You're young, you have no idea what life could be like in a civilized place."

"Do you? How do you know how the Robots treat people?"

"I have heard rumors. We all have. But I'm older than I look. I was a small boy before the war, Diane. But I remember, I remember. The luxuries, the comforts. You'll see."

"I ought to kill you," Diane said coldly. Starbuck blanched. "I might, too; first chance I get. You're so self-centered, you're almost inhuman. But maybe I'm dumb enough to think you'll realize your mistake someday and two of us will have a better chance of getting away than one. I don't know. I ought to kill you, though."

"I did it for you. I wanted you with me. I couldn't enjoy the life we're going to lead without you."

"You're a fool, Harry. . I can't even hate you. I feel sorry for

you. What do the Robots do from day to day? You don't even know that. You haven't the slightest idea what you've let us in for. You don't even know, for sure where we're going."

Starbuck shook his head. "You're wrong about that. We're going to the Citadel in New York. We should be arriving in a few minutes. You'll change your mind, Diane. Wait until you see the Citadel. Wait until—"

"You've never seen it. You're just guessing."

"It's more than a guess. Every rumor I have ever heard. Diane, I want you to share it with me, to learn to love it with me. You're beautiful. You weren't meant for buckskins," Starbuck fingered the tattered clothing barely covering her torso.

"Keep away from me."

"Don't you realize it's just the two of us now—and the Robots?"

"I'm warning you."

Starbuck shrugged and sat down at the other side of the small cubicle. "You're frightened now," he said. "I've got patience, if you haven't. Wait and see how the Robots will provide for us."

Diane shuddered and tried to hide it. Trapped aboard a ship full of Robots, she was companion to a madman. Strangely, no thought could comfort her but the image of Johnny Hope, somewhere

many miles behind them, a prisoner of Keleher and the band of Shining Ones. Perhaps, she thought grimly, the madman had for company a madwoman . . .

THE Shining Ones were bivouacking not two miles above the gutted ruins of Hamilton Village. Wood had been stacked for the cook-fires, but as yet no spark had been coaxed into flame. Half the tents had been raised tautly about their ridge poles, others were still to be unpacked. Five-hundred strong, the whole group gathered around a natural clearing in the woods, where deft-fingered girls were applying grease to Keleher and Johnny Hope.

They had stripped to shorts, Keleher with his thick-thewed limbs glistening in the fading sunlight, arms folded like some immobile, heroic statue, all muscle and sinew, carved from granite, Johnny fidgeting, waiting for the fight to start. He was surprised at his own objective lack of fear; he wanted only to start out after Diane.

"You probably wonder why they grease you," Amos Westler declared. Westler was a small, slim man with close-cropped graying hair and eyes that would twinkle, Johnny thought, even in darkness. He had come to Johnny's corner as a sort of unexpected second, to

ready him for battle. "It's a concession on the part of Keleher, Johnny Hope. He has declared openly your strength is no match for his. The slicking will make speed and dexterity count for more."

"Am I supposed to be grateful? The only reason I'm fighting him is because he won't let me seek Diane any other way. She could be in danger right now, her life might be at stake. Keleher is a fool."

"And life among the Shining Ones has always been an expendable item. Diane's life, your life, even Keleher's."

"What happens if I win?"

Westler sighed wistfully. "You won't. This won't be the first fight for Keleher, nor the last. Actually, I hope you do win."

"Why? And you haven't answered my question."

"Because I've always wanted to leave the encampment. But I'm not a man for the outdoors, Johnny. I wouldn't survive a week. With your companionship, I might. Should you win the fight, and should you decide to seek Diane, I would like to join you."

Johnny grasped his hand, shook it. "Done," he said.

Westler smiled, wiping grease on his trousers. "To answer your question, if you win you're the chief of this encampment."

Now Johnny was smiling. "A job I'm not particularly interested in. I only want to—"

"I know. Look for the girl. During the excitement, something went entirely unnoticed. A rocket ship took off, near the ruins of the Village. Rockets mean Robots—and from the Citadel. Tell me, Johnny Hope, if the trail leads there, will you follow?"

Johnny shrugged. "I hadn't thought of that, I didn't realize the Robots were near."

"Then you're going to back down?" Disappointment was in Westler's expressive eyes.

"Never. I saw New York once. I stood on the Jersey cliffs at sunset and gazed across the broad river at the Citadel with its winking lights and beacons. It is not a place of fear, but a place that men built, long ago. I will go."

Again Amos Westler sighed. "I wish you win this fight, Johnny Hope. I never wished for anything as much in my life. I was a college professor before the war and I learned this: the search for knowledge is a strange thing and knows no fear. But I am no young man, and this may be my last opportunity."

"Ready?" Keleher's voice roared across the clearing. "If the girls are finished carressing you with their oils . . . ?"

THE girls stepped back, looked at Johnny, tall and lithe but so small compared to Keleher, and shook their heads.

"Ready," Johnny said, moving out toward Keleher warily.

"His legs," Amos Westler confided. "He uses them like another pair of arms. Watch them."

The grease on his face had been applied too close to his eyes and Johnny found he had to blink to clear his vision. Keleher came lumbering across the clearing, gathering momentum. By the time he neared Johnny he was fairly rocketing down upon him. The muttering of the assembled encampment had been stilled as if by some unspoken command. There was the sound of Keleher's thundering feet and nothing else.

Juggernaut thundered close, was almost upon him, great arms outstretched, huge body shining red in the last light of the sun. At the last moment, Johnny sidestepped, thrust out his leg, added momentum to Keleher with his arms as he pounded by. Something struck his leg, there was a loud, bull-bellowing cry. Keleher flipped completely over and sprawled in the dust a dozen feet away.

He came up roaring his rage as Johnny waited, balancing on the balls of his feet, fists up and ready. Keleher parried Johnny's left hand when the blow was too long in

coming, struck with his own great right fist. Johnny went over on his back and felt Keleher at his throat almost before he had hit the ground. Now the crowd was churning with excitement and Johnny found himself thinking they must have smelled blood on the air.

Their heavily greased bodies prevented Keleher from applying a stranglehold. Johnny squirmed out from under, straddled the bigger man's back and felt himself borne aloft, still clinging there, as Keleher climbed to his feet and charged about the clearing. Johnny held grimly, his forearm circling the thick throat, choking off Keleher's breath. But the shaggy head twisted, broke free. The legs drummed backwards and Johnny whirled in time to fathom Keleher's plan.

He was going to crush Johnny against the bole of an oak tree, cracking his ribs and ending the battle at once. Without mirth, Johnny smiled. So intent was Kel-
eher upon his plan, he did not bother to hold Johnny on his back. Possibly he thought that was Johnny's intention, anyway. Johnny leaped away, rolling clear, as Kel-
eher backed into the tree trunk with all the strength of his huge muscles.

There was a terrible crunching sound as Keleher hit the tree and

went down as if axed. Groggily, he began to rise, but Johnny was waiting for him, waiting to see if there was any fight left in the half-conscious man. The eyes were watery, the lips slack, the arms twitching. Johnny waited . . .

"Stop!" someone cried. "I bring news."

At first the encampment shouted him off, but presently Johnny became aware of loud talking, of angry shouts, of a buzzing, as from a sundered hornets' nest, which swept the clearing. He whirled to face the newcomer as Keleher slumped at his feet, clawing the ground and gasping, "I don't . . . surrender . . . Johnny Hope. Only give . . . me . . . time to catch my wind . . . and . . ."

THEY turned to Johnny Hope, all of them, their new leader. For Keleher had spoken those words, then fell forward on his face. Three men carried him off to a tent, where two women brought vessels of water.

"They went looking for the three missing ones, Hope."

"What can we do?"

"The Robots."

"Tell us, Hope."

"What they did once they might do again."

Johnny laughed as reaction from his ordeal set in. They crowded around him, flies swarming for

honey. They hadn't given him a chance in the fight, but now because Keleher had cracked his own ribs instead of Johnny's, Johnny was their leader. It was a job he neither wanted nor would tolerate.

"What they're trying to say," Amos Westler told him, "is that they found Tom Burwood not far from here."

"What about Diane?" Johnny demanded eagerly.

"No Diane, no Starbuck. They found Burwood, hanging by his neck, dead."

"Dead?" Johnny said, dazed. "Diane?"

"You're not listening to me, young man. Diane they didn't find." Then, as if he suddenly realized he was addressing their new, if bewildered, leader, Westler apologized. "I'm sorry. While Burwood's corpse was the only one they found, there were shreds of clothing in the undergrowth. There—"

"Diane?"

"Possibly, they're not sure. I would say all indications point to the Robot Citadel. You said you would go, but now that you are our leader, perhaps you've changed your mind. When leadership is thrust upon a man—"

"When an old leader is vanquished," plump Gilbert bubbled effusively, "there is a celebration,

sir. And there is an edict to be handed down by the new leader. Do we banish Keleher from the encampment when his condition permits? Do we slay him for you? Do we—"

"Do whatever you want," Johnny said irritably. "I'm not staying."

"This is some joke!"

"I have nothing against Keleher. I still have nothing against him. I'm leaving. When Keleher regains consciousness, when his body heals, you may tell him for me I did not depose him. He is still your leader."

"That is clearly impossible."

"Is it? I command you in this. Keleher remains on as chief. But tell him this for me: some day I may call upon him and his people for help, and when I do . . ."

"You have vision," said Amos Westler, admiration in his voice.

"When I do, I want no delays. That is my message to your ruler, to Keleher. Is it understood?"

Gilbert and some of the others nodded. A small, intense man, Westler fidgeted about impatiently while the girls returned with thick strips of cloth and scrubbed the grease from Johnny Hope.

"I'm now a celebrity," he said to Westler, feeling himself briefly as one with these wild people as they gathered around for his ad-

vice, preparing a victory banquet over roaring fires as darkness covered the bivouac area. He munched a savory leg of fowl, slaked his thirst from a moist leather wine bag, the claret stream gushing into his mouth from the spout.

"You see," Westler could not hide his disappointment. "It is even as I said. You will stay."

Johnny grinned at him. "Are you tired?"

"Why, no."

Tossing a chicken bone into the fire, Johnny went on: "And do you know the way to New York in the darkness?"

"No—o."

"I think I do. Are you ready to start?"

"Are you serious?" Westler cried. "Do you mean that, Johnny Hope?"

"Let's go." And not waiting for an answer, Johnny clapped Gilbert on the back, told him to take charge until Keleher had recovered, and left the clearing with Westler trailing at his heels.

The night closed in about them, not quiet, but alive with the sounds of insects and the occasional soft-pat-padding of small hunting animals. Johnny set a quick, mile-eating pace which made Westler's breath wheeze in and out of his lungs asthmatically, but the older man did not complain once.

CHAPTER VI

"WE have openings in the repair bays or for servants among the inner circle of Shining Ones who work hand in hand with our masters," the old woman told Starbuck and Diane after they had been taken from the rocket ship in New York and shunted underground where the subways had been converted into living quarters for humans without being given a chance to see the city. "Which will it be?"

"We're not cut out to be menials," Starbuck said coldly, "but the repair bays don't appeal to me, either. You say servants to the leaders themselves?"

"To the top echelon of Shining Ones, yes. You will find the socio-economic hierarchy rigidly enforced here. Well, which will it be?"

Starbuck had heard about palace revolutions. It would be servants to the leaders, naturally. Let them bide their time, let them learn what they could of the Citadel and its Rbots. "Servants," he said.

"Are you married?" The old woman, shamelessly bare to the waist on this hot day, smiled at them with a perfect set of false teeth which seemed laughably incongruous in her gaunt, seamed face. Her bare breasts were dry as parchment and hung, flat but

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pendulant, almost to her waist. From a distance she looked almost like a manikin, a leathery, humanoid robot.

"We are," Starbuck beamed.

But Diane said, "Certainly not."

The old woman cackled. "I believe the woman. In that case, you will live in these underground dormitories."

"Not in the City upstairs?" Starbuck demanded, disappointed.

"Not in the City, that is correct. Do not ask why, it is merely so. We work for the Robots and obey them, is that clear? Some day the only humans left on Earth will be Shining Ones, or so the Robots tell us. Then we will climb up into the light of day and take our rightful place, side by side with them. Meanwhile, we do as we are told."

"Are you satisfied, Harry?" Diane wanted to know. "The Robots make promises—and destroy our brothers."

"Our brothers?" Starbuck laughed. "You mean the people of the villages? Those, our brothers?"

"The Plague makes brother hate brother, but you're a fool, Starbuck. The Robots want that, this playing of human against human."

"Yes? How do you know? You've never . . ."

"I don't know. But Amos Westler always said so."

"Westler!" Starbuck spat con-

temptuously. "A reader of books. We go out to hunt or raid, Westler seeks his books and grows soft looking through them."

"With more Westlers and less Starbucks in the world," Diane began, "we probably wouldn't have had to fight three World Wars and never would have—"

"That's enough," said Starbuck, his eyes darting suspiciously to the old woman, who was taking in their conversation with an amused look on her face.

"It is quite enough," agreed the old woman. "If you want to last here more than a few days."

"Can the Robots actually understand us?" Starbuck asked.

The old woman shrugged thin shoulders. "Some say they can read our minds. It is not important. Those of us who rule can understand. Since they can somehow communicate with the Robots, it is the same thing."

"We will conform," promised Starbuck.

"Like robots of robots," said Diane bitterly.

JOHNNY Hope rubbed the stubble of beard on his face and frowned at Westler. "I'm not sure, but I think I know this place. We should reach the New York River this afternoon."

They stood in a forest glade not a hundred yards from one of the

overgrown concrete highways upon which the Robots were known to tread. A path paralleled the highway through the woods, and upon this they made their way.

"Sometimes I wonder if you know what you're letting yourself in for," Westler mused.

"I want to find Diane. I'll take whatever goes with it."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"I'm not sure I know myself. All I know is I think of her all the time. Nothing matters as much as finding her—and freeing her."

"We could be wrong. Perhaps she is not with the Robots at all."

"What do you think?"

"I think she is. Everything points to it. I was only pointing out that we're not sure. Johnny, not many years ago I met a man, another Shining One, who had fled from New York. He was old and he didn't last long, but he told me things which—"

"About the Robots, you mean?"

"Yes. You know, of course, they can help cure the Plague. Instead, they spread it."

"I never could figure out why."

"Who knows what sort of thinking the Robots can do? We're not even sure if they possess sentience at all, although I suspect they do. But in the last days of the War, man made a frantic mistake. The Robots were conceived as fighters, were

built to hate man and to kill man. When we gave the Robots a different mission entirely, it failed. They've simply strengthened the Plague toxoid and made it lethal. I don't think they'll rest until every man on Earth is destroyed.

"We're weak now, disorganized. We've left civilization behind us. You'd think the Robots could do the job overnight, but the only thing that prevents them, actually, is their lack of numbers."

"Most of my people—I mean the villagers, not my people any longer—most of them believe the Robots somehow *will* cure the Plague."

"And most of my people," said Westler, "believe their destiny is hand in glove with the destiny of the Robots. They put it this way: we are hated by the rest of mankind, we are apparently not hated by the Robots. Why not cooperate with them, then? Actually, a free band of Shining Ones as large as Keleher's is the exception, not the rule. Every day, more and more Shining Ones go to the Citadel in New York or elsewhere to work for the Robots. Not a pretty picture, is it?"

"What can we do about it?"

"At present, I don't have the slightest notion. We've got to do something, though. Someone's got to do something, unless nature's ready to write off mankind as a bad experiment. Perhaps I am a

pedant, Johnny. I do not know. But I will tell you this: when all the great strides in human history were made, the pedants, the scholars paved the way. I want to see the Citadel not only to learn but to see if there is something, some way, to end the reign of the Robots. It seems incredible that men, their makers, lacked the foresight to equip them with an Achilles Heel, if the need ever arose."

A BRUPTLY, Johnny motioned Westler down with a wave of his hand. "It looks like you're going to find out soon enough. Take a look."

Johnny parted the bushes in front of them. Here the dirt path had angled sharply toward the highway so that not more than thirty yards separated them. Marching silently along the concrete in the direction of New York, quiet but for the clanking of their joints, was a long file of Robots.

"Spongey metal foot-pads," whispered Westler, staring eagerly at the Robots. "We built fine fighting machines, Johnny, and now find we have to suffer the consequences."

Johnny nodded impatiently, hardly feeling philosophical. "This is what we came here for, Amos," he said. "Afraid?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not

sure yet."

Johnny was not sure, either, but did not want to brood about it. He stood up recklessly, forcing his way through the undergrowth toward the highway. By the time he reached it, Westler trailing uncertainly at his heels, he was shouting. It worked magically. The long line of Robots, extending as far as they could see to the left and several hundred yards to the right, stopped its steady advance. The great metal heads, each bigger than a man, swiveled on the sockets which joined them with the tiny bodies. The unblinking eyes which now faced them—another set for each Robot surveyed the rear, Johnny knew—were lined up row on row.

"We want to join you," Johnny called out. "We want employment in the Citadel." Did a human ask a Robot for employment? Johnny hardly knew, for nothing had been further from his mind until recently.

The leading Robot came back down the line toward them. Johnny could read nothing in the artificial eyes and had to check a wild impulse to run.

"Sometimes I prefer the uncomplicated life of an unimaginative man of action," Westler moaned softly.

It was, Johnny knew, a good

point. He did not bother telling Westler that both traits had merged in him, which might have been better or worse, depending upon the circumstances.

Then the Robot was upon them.

"63-17-B?"

"Yes, sir?" All Robots, even those with a primary level of thought as high as 63-17-B and an existing secondary level, addressed Central Intelligence as sir.

"After exhaustive tests, it has been adjudged that an over-estimation has been made regarding your mental ability. Since that is the case, it will mechanically be necessary to change your position."

Sullenly, plotting shapeless revenge at a Central Intelligence which would never consider the possibility of an outside factor intervening unexpectedly and hence altering or spoiling what had been planned, 63-17-B listened to his fate.

"A position currently is vacant as supervisor of the Shining Ones, in a section of the repair bays. Do you have any objections to assuming this new duty in place of the old?"

To object was disastrous. To object was to admit you needed not merely a lesser job commensurate with your lesser skill but also complete readjustment of your

thinking process. "No objections at all, sir," thought 63-17-B, all the while smouldering with resentment. His time would come. What was the old human expression about every dog having his day?

"Then you will report at once to repair bay 151. Do you know its location?"

"I will find it." That was the prescribed answer. One rarely asked questions. One found out for oneself from Central Information. 63-17-B half thought he was still being tested in some less-obvious and hence all the more deadly fashion. But to be placed in charge of a gang of humans! It was degrading.

"In time, 63-17-B, you shall be tested again. If it is our opinion you have gained back what we thought you once possessed, you will again be elevated to a higher station."

63-17-B cursed Central Intelligence on a private wavelength. Central Intelligence was the creator of perfect plans. If a plan misfired, Central Intelligence could not be held responsible. Since accidents of nature had never been considered valid excuses, blame always fell on the executing Robot. Until recently, 63-17-B had managed to beat the system, largely through luck. Now while he realized it was the most mechanical thing in

the world to do as you were told, he could not hide his bitter disappointment. But he pushed it from his mind all at once when he felt another mind nibbling at his private wavelength. No one could be trusted, not when each Robot tried to outdo every other Robot in the eyes of Central Intelligence, not when private thoughts could be intercepted by monitors, not when communal thinking was considered preferable to individual thinking.

That thought made 63-17-B shudder, his joints clanking as a sudden surge of power, the electrical equivalent of adrenal secretions, coursed through his frame. He was indeed thinking not along the prescribed lines. Probably something *was* wrong with him.

“THIS is ironical,” said Amos Westler as the first inert Robot came sliding down the conveyor belt to stop, a rusted man-shaped creature twice man’s size with huge conical head and withdrawn antenna, in front of his bench. “We’ll never learn anything this way. You won’t learn the whereabouts of Diane at this bench, and I won’t learn what I’ve come to find out.”

“We’re not on duty twenty-four hours a day,” Johnny reminded him, unfastening leg-joints with a

large, wrench-like instrument and wiping the parts with an oily rag before he reassembled them. “If Diane is here, I’ll find her.”

“Well, we’ve learned nothing so far. They took us into the Citadel through a tile-walled tunnel—”

“Surely one of the wonders of the world!” Johnny cried, remembering.

“The world has many wonders, natural and man-made, if we could but see them. Anyway, they then deposited us in those underground quarters where all the humans seem to live here. The old hag interviewed us—”

“Yes. She wouldn’t say if she’d seen Starbuck and Diane, or not when I described them, but it sure made her smile. I think they’re here in the Citadel, Amos.”

“—then assigned us to this repair bay for work. Do you realize that except for the brief time it took to go from the tunnel exit to the underground quarters, we haven’t seen the light of day. Try learning something in these, these caves!”

Without warning, the conveyor belts were stilled. Hidden lighting in the walls flared brighter as a group of Robots entered the large vault.

“ATTENTION!” A voice blared at them, oddly metallic. Johnny could not tell where it came from.

"Robot 63-17-B is now entering the vault. As your supervisor, 63-17-B is to be obeyed as if he were Central Intelligence itself. He is to be addressed not directly, but through your human supervisor."

The Robot numbered 63-17-B (but the numbers were hidden under the central face plate and you hardly could tell the machines apart) made a brief inspection of the vault, then climbed to his niche in the wall, where he sat completely without motion while the other Robots filed from the chamber.

"Although we can't address the Robot, our supervisor can," Westler said eagerly. "That means, at least, communication of some sort is possible."

"I guess so. Why don't you get to know the supervisor?"

"You're much better at that sort of thing than I am, Johnny?"

"We came here for different reasons, don't forget. There's an old hag I'd like to answer more questions when I find her."

"Here comes our supervisor now," Westler whispered. Then, aloud: "My name is Amos Westler."

"I don't care what it is. It's recorded. Keep working, friend." The supervisor was a brutal-faced man who snarled out his words. His jaw, cheekbones and forehead were

silver-sheened with Plague scar, with the Plague silver remaining there as well as on his limbs. His face seemed metallic as a Robot's.

"See?" Westler whispered in despair as another damaged Robot slid to a stop in front of them.

Johnny offered a wan grin. "Take it easy," he said, but hardly felt more than the last remaining shreds of patience within himself. If the old hag wouldn't talk when he saw her tonight . . .

"DON'T bother calling me names, young man," cackled the hag. "I'm virtually immune. It is against existing regulations to give you that information since it is felt all ties with the past and the outside world must be broken, not gradually but at once."

"Listen," Johnny said desperately, "you must remember your own youth." He had tried every other verbal assault he could think of. Now he hardly thought flattery would work on the ancient bag of bones in front of him, but it seemed his last hope. "You must have had your lovers in your day, were you as attractive for your years as a younger woman . . ."

Something melted in the hag's eyes. She scrubbed her breastbone with the knuckles of one parchment hand, as if preening. "Why, yes," she admitted.

"I'm in love with the girl. You must know how I feel. He—he took her." At least in part, it was the truth. In love with Diane? He'd never thought of it, yet what had impelled him to battle Keleher in an uneven fight, to set out for New York when he could have ruled the encampment instead, to surrender himself to the Robots of the Citadel? Johnny smiled. Trying to awaken something in the hag, he had succeeded in awakening something, all right, but in himself.

"Such information I cannot give you, young man—".

"And I thought you remembered your youth!"

"— but they say the view from the corridor 13 exit is magnificent. To reach it, one travels along corridor 14, which is a dormitory for some of our young, unmarried women." The hag cackled. "Don't get caught."

"I won't. Thank you."

"Good luck, my boy." The hag patted his shoulder; crowed something which he failed to hear, disappeared from the room.

Outside at a forking of four corridors, Johnny found a map and studied it. Lights recessed high on the walls showed him his direction, and soon he was pounding down the corridors and praying silently that the hag knew what she was

talking about. By the time he reached corridor 14 he was breathless.

Several young women stood in the corridor talking. Their chatter was stilled when they saw Johnny, and those who had been in various stages of undress hastened to cover themselves. Clearly, it was not common for a man to venture this way, particularly at night.

"Are you lost, man?"

"No. I'm looking for someone. A girl named Diane."

They were smiling, and Johnny began to wonder. He suspected that corridor trysts were not particularly uncommon.

"Is she expecting you?" demanded the boldest of the women, who had stepped to the fore while her more timid companions drew back, ready to dart into the surrounding cubicles.

"I cannot truthfully say," Johnny admitted. "If she knew I was in the Citadel, I think she would be expecting me." But even that was with tongue in cheek, for ever since he had refused to fight with Starbuck, Diane had said not a word to him.

"This Diane, what does she look like?"

Johnny described her. When he finished, the woman chuckled. "Could you perhaps be trysting? From your description, I would say

you love the girl, for no woman could be so beautiful. I think I know who you mean, though."

Still chuckling, the tall woman entered one of the cubicles while her companions melted away into the others. Soon Johnny stood alone in the corridor, waiting as nervously as a youth in Hamilton Village might wait while the village matchmaker entered a house to fetch him his bride. Someone appeared in the doorway. Not the tall woman. Diane!

"Johnny . . . Johnny Hope . . ."

"Diane, I never thought I would see you again. I thought Starbuck . . ."

"I was so afraid for you, because you couldn't adjust to your new life, because I thought you might do something desperate. I was a fool, I should have known why you refused to fight with Starbuck. Johnny, Johnny . . . let me look at you."

"Look later," he said, his eyes suddenly, unexpectedly misty. He drew her to him and for a long time stood there with her, feeling the beat of her heart tight against him, the warmth of her body and long smoothness of limbs. She was trembling, the warmth of her all a-flutter against him. She was murmuring something softly against his shoulder. He was whispering in her ear, "I love you. I love you,

Diane . . ."

HER lips were perfumed and yielding, her arms went behind him, hands joining behind his neck, then playing with his hair. The Plague, his exile from Hamilton Village, the fight with Keleher, the long trek, even captivity in the Citadel—all were a small price to pay, he thought dreamily, then abruptly drew back.

"We don't want to stay here all our lives," he said.

"I'll go anywhere with you, Johnny."

"Save that for later, darling—but I love to hear it. I don't think we'd have much trouble leaving the Citadel."

"Not if we go tonight, we wouldn't. Every day I work with Starbuck, but if we left at once, now, tonight!"

Her new-found enthusiasm not only matched his, but added wings to it. He was on the point of saying yes, of leading her through the corridors in a dash for freedom, when he remembered. "We can't," he said. "Not tonight. We've got to include Amos Westler in our plans."

"Westler is here?"

Johnny explained the situation to her, then added, "Tonight Westler went looking for some information about the Robots. He feels

certain they have an Achilles Heel someplace, if only he can find it. Actually, it won't be easy dragging him away from the Citadel, even tomorrow night."

"We can wait one night longer, sweetheart. You convince him tomorrow."

"I don't like the thought of leaving you alone again until tomorrow night."

Diane stilled his words by placing cool fingers to his lips. "We have no choice. I can take care of myself one night more."

"Starbuck?"

"I can take care of myself in that respect, too. Go back to your dormitory and get some sleep."

"Tomorrow night. Same time, same place. Westler will be with me."

They came close and drank of each other again. They parted, Johnny edging down the corridor backwards until the last shaft of light disappeared from the entrance to Diane's cubicle. His head was whirling in a giddy new delight, in a rapture which clouded his mind with a buoyant optimism which almost made him forget the Citadel, the Robots, and men like Harry Starbuck . . .

Footsteps pounding down the hall, heavy, too heavy for a woman's. Quickly, Johnny flattened himself in the darkness of a niche

which served some nameless purpose. With the light behind it, a shadow loomed, reared up toward him.

It was Harry Starbuck.

Johnny held his breath until the big man with the smug boy's face strode past. Heading for Diane? In all probability, yes. Follow him? Stop him? Attack him? Wild thoughts ran their course through Johnny's head. And lose everything, all they were looking forward to, for his impulsiveness? Footsteps receded. The shadow vanished. Even if he could follow Starbuck, overpower him and escape with Diane, their secret would be secret no longer, which would leave Amos Westler to fare for himself.

Wait for tomorrow, Johnny Hope. His course seemed clear, yet he had to fight himself all the way back down the corridor until he had reached the male dormitories.

For many hours—which seemed like days—he waited up for Amos Westler, but his thoughts were all with Diane. If Starbuck so much as touched her . . .

CHAPTER VII

"I FOUND it, Johnny! It was so obvious, it seems incredible no one has tried to end the Robot's

reign before. We can do it. One man could do it, alone. One man, with careful planning—”

“Diane is here, Amos. I saw her tonight. We’re going to try to break out tomorrow night, the three of us.”

“You see,” Westler went on, “there are two items of importance to consider. The first is Central Intelligence, the mind, the *elan vital*, the sentience which motivates the Robots. Did you know, could you ever imagine, that there was but one Central Intelligence for the entire western hemisphere, Johnny? It seems incredible, but it is not. That was the Achilles Heel we sought, the seed of destruction which some pessimistic scientist had sown into the Robots in case man had created a Frankenstein.”

“Can you believe it? Tomorrow night, the three of us will be on our way out of here. I think we stand a good chance, Amos. If we—”

“The second item—why, what in the world are you talking about? Escape? Now? Never! Within our grasp is the chance to free humanity from a thraldom which it does not yet fully recognize. Would you give up the chance to render the Robots harmless in exchange for your own personal safety?”

“Not mine. Diane’s. We love

each other, Amos. I wouldn’t expose her to any danger. We’re leaving tomorrow and we want you to come with us.”

Westler paced back and forth, caged in spirit more than in body. “Look at you,” he said bitterly. “You call yourself a man. But have you the right to a woman’s love when you think only of tomorrow, of one day out of thousands, of one small life out of all that humanity has to offer? You want to hold the girl and kiss her and show her your virility, eh? While the rest of the race goes to pot.”

“That’s enough, Amos!” Johnny cried. “My motives are my own. We leave here tomorrow.”

“You’re weak, Johnny Hope. You’re a coward.”

Johnny said, “Shut up, damn you.” He couldn’t deny all that Amos was saying, but his parents had perished at the hands of a man-made Plague, he had been driven from his home, rejected by the Shining Ones, even, until he proved himself in battle. What did he owe to humanity, to that big, sprawling concept which took in all kinds of men and their women, children, good people, bad ones, big and small, with every type of mind and every type of body . . . ?

“All right, marry the girl. Will

you raise a family? You're Shining Ones, Johnny, both of you. The rest of humanity fears you, and rightfully. Your children will be stoned away if they venture near normal people. Perhaps life with the Robots would be best for them after all.

"Here you have the chance to stop all that. Not only could we negate the power of the Robots; but we could destroy the Plague as well. Did you hear me, we could destroy the Plague? Before you give me your final answer, let me tell you what I found."

"I'm listening. But—"

"But nothing. Only listen. This Central Intelligence is a vast cybernetics machine occupying an entire building—ironically, it is the United Nations building where once were housed the dreams of mankind. Now, understand this, Johnny. Every Robot in North and South America has its own particular wavelength, although the master intelligence is in tune with all of them. Each individual Robot sentience is dependent for its existence upon the great cybernetics machines in Central Intelligence. In other words, if you were to destroy them, at one blow you would 'kill' every Robot in the hemisphere!"

"How did you find all that out?"

WESTLER smiled. "There was one thing the Robots did not bargain for—an ex-college professor! The information was available in, of all places, the main library for humans here in the city. It took some finding, but as an old hand at research I had an edge even on the Robots with their mechanical minds. Anyway, all you'd have to do is destroy this Central Intelligence, and—"

"Might as well say destroy the moon, Amos. It's probably so well guarded a whole Army of men couldn't break through, let alone two of us."

"That's right," Westler said eagerly, "men could never hope to get through, but Robots could."

"What are you talking about?"

"The second thing I learned tonight. Once again, it was so deeply cross-referenced, so thoroughly hidden away that although it was available if one knew where to look, the science of research is such a dead thing that no one knew of its existence, probably not even the Robots. Johnny, the earliest model Robots were built to function in a double fashion. They were Robots, yes—but they are also compartments in which a man can fit for manual control. They were originally designed, you might say, as glorified suits of armor. While the research material is nat-

urally old, all I could gather seems to indicate that no changes have ever been made structurally in those early models. In other words, a man could climb inside a Robot today, right now, and no one would know the difference."

"You're forgetting one thing," Johnny pointed out. "Are you going to walk up to a Robot and tell him, 'Pardon me, old fellow, I'd like to borrow you and use you for a disguise for a while'?"

"I'm not forgetting anything. We work in the repair bays, remember? We have access to partially dismantled Robots. We could find ourselves two dismantled old ones, somehow manage to get inside, make our way to Central Intelligence"

"I still haven't said I'm going to do it. I'd like to help you, Amos. I'll take your word about the plan. It has possibilities. But that still has nothing to do with my own problems. Right now Diane is the most important thing."

"Diane's future, your future, all our futures ultimately depend on this. What's the matter with you? You fail to see the forest for the trees. Tomorrow, what's tomorrow, with all mankind's days ahead of us—slave or free? Perhaps one man could do the job alone, although two would have a better chance. But I think you

know I'm not the man for the job. I don't await your answer, Johnny Hope. I've no one else to turn to. Humanity awaits your answer."

"Let me think," said Johnny, waving Westler away when he would have continued talking. More quickly than he dared hope, he had found Diane. With equal swiftness, Westler had discovered what he sought. That left Johnny in the middle of a tug-of-war which wouldn't wait indefinitely for his answer.

AS the closing gong sounded, 63-17-B watched the Shining Ones shuffle away from their benches and make their way down the corridor toward the cafeteria which would serve them an unimaginative but well-balanced evening meal. But two humans remained behind, talking avidly over the gleaming bodies of two stripped-down Robots. Strange, thought 63-17-B, who was now confronted with the first even mildly unusual event since taking over the dull routine of his new job that they should continue working after the closing gong had sounded. He could summon Hartness, the scarred human supervisor, and have him talk with the two, or . . . Hartness, his metal-jointed foot! He would do no such thing. If perhaps the humans were up to some mischief,

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and if it did not endanger 63-17-B's own position still further, then let them play. If it gave a few Robots and even Central Intelligence a hard time for a while, it served them right. Of course, nothing really serious could come from the tampering of two helpless humans . . .

"What about that guy up there?" Johnny raised an eyebrow in the direction of the supervising Robot, motionless on his stone perch. "Is he watching 'us'?"

"It appears that he is. Unfortunately, we can't do a thing about it. At least not until we find out if these gadgets will work with us inside them. Here, Johnny—you see these tiny items? These are transistors, using germanium instead of a vacuum grid to activate electrons, smaller, more compact, more powerful, of longer life. Without them the whole science of cybernetics which ultimately made the Robots possible would never have advanced beyond the rudimentary stage. For with transistors replacing vacuum tubes you still need the entire U. N. building to house Central Intelligence. Under the older system, all New York City would not have been enough."

"Tell me later," Johnny pleaded. "I want to get started. The longer we delay here the longer it will take until we're finished.

And I still have that appointment with Diane tonight. I couldn't contact her during the day because she said she works with Starbuck. We've got to hurry."

Westler's hands, guiding the complex tools, moved with swift efficiency, as if, indeed, he had worked with the Robots all his life. Wires were crossed, insulated, re-arranged. Gaps and relays were tested and retested, gears changed, long-unused parts oiled, cleaned, checked for defects. Surface plates were clamped into place over layers of insulation. At last the two Robots lay there, supine but—Westler hoped—ready for human use.

"He's still watching," said Johnny.

"Let him. We couldn't prevent him. Only hope he suddenly doesn't decide to come down here for a closer look or send for help. It seems amazing he's done neither so far."

"Maybe he's asleep."

"Robots do not sleep. I assure you. Well, it's ready." Westler reached into the Robots' interior before clamping on the final head plates. Each Robot stood up in ponderous silence.

"You first, Johnny. I can clamp my plate from the inside. Are you sure my explanations on how to work this were satisfactory? Once inside we'll have to contact each

other by signals only."

"What about the radio sets inside? I don't know much about radio, but you said they worked."

"They do, but the wavelength might be too close to a Robot wavelength and we'd give ourselves away. Remember, we are to be nothing more or less than two Robots once we climb inside. That way, there shouldn't be any trouble. All ready? Up you go."

Johnny was boosted up, pulled himself within the cramped interior of the Robot. There was barely room for him to stand upright, his shoulders hunched, arms tight in front of him. A dizzying mass of dials and levers confronted him suddenly, and although Westler had explained them and diagrammed them and made Johnny memorize them, he was still bewildered by direct contact. He was almost afraid to try his first movement, lest the Robot remain immobile.

The face plate slammed home. Johnny could see through the one-way plastic of the Robot's eyes as Westler climbed into his own machine.

Johnny pulled the starting lever and felt his Robot lurch forward. Must learn to control the motion . . . so . . . he was now aware of a lumbering gait, of a steady advance toward the farther wall . . .

Something made him whirl and peer through the 'rear' eyes. The Robot supervisor was coming toward them at a rate of speed they couldn't match.

"YOU see?" said Starbuck proudly. "I am no longer a servant. I suppose you would call me a junior executive now. But I'm on the way up. Definitely on the way up. In a while there is no telling how far I can go."

"I'm sure of it," Diane nodded in agreement. She didn't want to be bothered by Starbuck today, not when her thoughts were all on the night and Johnny. She was so nervous she couldn't keep from looking anxious. If only Starbuck, all wrapped up in himself the way he was, would fail to see it for a few hours longer.

"I suppose you wonder how I can advance so rapidly. It is quite simple, Diane. I look around me. I make contacts. I miss nothing. As an example, I even know of your meeting with Johnny Hope last night."

"What!"

"I wouldn't really mind it, except that my informant said you are considering escape from the Citadel. That, of course, is out of the question."

In his short time at the Citadel, Diane realized, Starbuck had af-

fected a way of speaking which hardly fit his booming voice or boyish face. It was as if he had decided to ape the Shining Ones who stood highest in the Robots' confidence. To Diane it was contemptuous, although now her mind was awhirl with the thought that she and Johnny had been discovered.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a small, helpless voice.

"Hope will be arrested. Naturally, he will never be permitted to see you again."

Diane stared at Starbuck in horror. Johnny must be found and warned. There was still time. They could alter their plans, this time in secrecy, without any women around who could spy on them for Starbuck. But she had to find Johnny before it was too late.

In sudden despair, she realized she didn't even know where to look.

CHAPTER VIII

STOP! Stand perfectly still. The thought was unexpected, peremptory, driving into Johnny's brain with more authority than any words. He wanted to stop, wanted to immobilize the Robot in which he hid—but where had the thought come from?

Westler's Robot was pointing a

many-jointed metal arm at the supervising Robot which rushed toward them. Then, did the thought originate there? Could the Robot somehow send a soundless message to them?

Stop! Let me dismantle you.

The urge to render his own Robot motionless became stronger within Johnny. It was as if the unbidden thought originated outside his head but tried to direct his own muscles, as surely as his own mind.

Something made soft beeping noises in his ear and it took a while before he realized Westler wanted to break their radio silence, so soon after they had started. The other Robot was almost upon them.

Awkward and uncomfortable in his cramped quarters, Johnny found the radio switch and pulled it.

"We've got to destroy that Robot, Johnny. Now, at once, or we're finished."

"But how—"

The Robot was upon them, its unbidden thoughts stronger.

Halt . . .

It was Johnny who struck the first blow — clumsily, lifting his great right arm up and bringing it down stiffly on the other Robot's head. Metal arms came up, swung blurringly. A clanging tumult deafened Johnny as dents appeared

inside the chamber of his own Robot's head. He triggered the levers mechanically now, aware that they were fighting under a tremendous disadvantage, for their fingers were still stiff on the unfamiliar controls and their artificial reflexes could not hope to match the Robot's.

"Look out, Johnny—"

Two metal shapes loomed, Westler and the real Robot. The three of them came together, clashing, clanging, metal arms swinging and wrecking metal bodies. It was Westler's Robot which went down first, slowly, buckling at the knee joints and then collapsing. Metal feet drove down upon it ponderously, crushing the head section. Westler's Robot was still.

Johnny hammered with huge metal hands at the other robot hardly knowing where he might strike a mortal blow. But the Robot slowed, its reactions grew feeble, its blows denting Johnny's head-chamber no longer. Finally, it sprawled across Westler's Robot, then rolled away and was still.

Cursing to himself, Johnny climbed down from his Robot, found the battered head plate of Westler's, forced it open.

He saw at once he could never hope to extricate the older man, for the metal walls of his chamber had been crushed, knifing into bone and flesh and trapping him.

"Amos, can you hear me?"

THE eyelids fluttered opened with pain. "I never will see the end, Johnny . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't . . . fool me. I'm all broken, inside. I—"

"We'll get you out of there in no time."

"You'd have to melt . . . the metal down to . . . do it, and you know it."

"We'll do it."

Your only hope is that the Robot did not have time to broadcast a warning. If . . . he did . . . you will have to hurry, but—"

"They still don't know our plans. Maybe they think we only want to escape, using these Robot bodies for a disguise."

"Perhaps. I hadn't thought . . . of that." Westler lapsed into silence, his face twisted with pain. "If you can do it, if you can destroy their cybernetics center . . . new start for humanity. I was going to tell you about the Plague, Johnny. The Robots . . . have been using . . . a particularly virulent form of the . . . toxin which does not exist naturally. Spreading it in the air, all over the earth. That, combined with the . . . toxin carried by a Shining One, causes illness . . . and death." Westler's words were harder to hear now,

low, the barest whisper of sound. Johnny leaned close to the glazed eyes, the barely opening lips. "When the Robots are . . . gone . . . the Plague will die out almost at once. Shining Ones even will be harmless. You see why it's so important? You see . . . "

"I could never do it without you. We'll hide away somewhere, nurse you back to health—"

"Stop fooling . . . an old man. We both know I'm dying."

"That's ridiculous."

"Please . . . don't interrupt me. I want to finish telling you . . . the Robots communicate with humans by telepathy. You witnessed it yourself, a few . . . minutes ago. They can make it seem like your own thoughts and . . . who can say? Thought waves are electromagnetic, like . . . so many other things. There is nothing mysterious about . . . telepathy. Give humanity a chance to study what the . . . Robots have done and . . . you'll have civilization flourishing again within a generation. Give humanity the chance . . ." It was a whisper, a prayer.

On that final note of hope, Westler died.

"THE human has emerged from the underground within his Robot and is heading northeast across the city."

"I still think we ought to stop him now, while we know we can do it."

"Silence. Think on the primary level. In unity we will triumph. It is our one weapon they cannot hope to match."

"But 63-17-B warned us before he perished—"

"Precisely. That the humans were attempting something other than mere escape. We must find out what that is, what they have learned. Don't you realize that if this man fails another might succeed in his place? Whatever knowledge he has, perhaps it is widely disseminated. We must find out before we kill him."

There was a silence among the conclave of motionless Robots, their unblinking eyes intent upon a huge three-dimensional map of the city, following a tiny pip of light in its slow progress.

"He seems to be heading straight for Central Intelligence."

"That's hardly possible, unless it is mere coincidence."

"I don't think so . . . See? Not half a mile away, now."

"Have the supervisors discovered who is missing?"

"Yes. He was employed in the very repair bay where 63-17-B perished—a defective Robot, incidentally, and no great loss. We have given his name to the top-

level Shining Ones in the hope that they can help us."

"There is a Shining One, a human, here right now. He wants an audience concerning the rebel.

"Very well, although we'll have to make it brief."

Starbuck entered the chamber cockily, then lost his poise when he saw the solemn, unmoving conclave of Robots. "I have outside," he began, moistening his lips and talking rapidly, "a woman who this man, this Johnny Hope, loves. Can you understand me? Do you know what love is? He won't do a thing that might harm her."

We can understand.

"I thought that—"

We can read your thoughts. Leave your name with the Robot outside. Take this woman within the U. N. building and hold her there until you hear from us.

"The U. N. building?"

No questions. Go.

Starbuck shuffled from the room, self-conscious and fearful under the mental command.

"I doubt if we'll need the hostage, but you never can tell."

"It seems incredible that—"

"Does it? The man has almost reached the U. N. building. It will take him perhaps half an hour, for the rubble is piled high there. Underground he could reach it in a few moments, but apparently he

is unfamiliar with the passages."

"He has only recently arrived at the Citadel."

"Somehow, they have learned something. It is why we cannot kill the man until we are sure. Have them alerted at Central Intelligence, but let him enter. Watch him. If he blunders about as if he has arrived there by accident, kill him. If he knows something, take him alive."

"Someday we must learn the secret of Central Intelligence, if we are to survive. We must learn how to duplicate it or face the possibility of perishing in a single accident."

"Men built it once. Men could do it again."

"Defective! Silence. Man can do nothing we cannot do."

Then they were quiet, watching the tiny, darting pip on the three-dimensional map as it struggled through the uncleared rubble southwest of the U. N. building.

EVEN in ruin, the city held more wonders for Johnny Hope than he had ever thought possible. In many ways, it was like a scar on the face of the earth, pitted with bomb craters, strewn with the debris of toppled towers, its streets choked with fallen, crumbling masonry and blocked by the skeletons of buildings which

once had stood, bare and rusted now but not always so, as monuments to the greatness of man. Yet it was a scar which could be healed, a broken, dying city which could be made great again, with men and women roving its streets, repairing the structures, making the living city function once more.

That was Amos Westler's dream. It was the dream of all mankind, Johnny thought philosophically, although they did not realize it as they roved the earth in hunterbands of Shining Ones or tilled its soil in small communities fearful of the Plague.

Now, directly ahead of him, he could see the monolithic slab of the U. N. building. Like one structure in five, it stood incredibly intact, a remembrance of the past and a promise of the future. We can build again, Johnny thought, without the Robots and the Plague. They could build again or they would die. Natural world or artificial world — men or Robots — they could not survive jointly.

Battered and broken but still functioning adequately, Johnny's Robot pushed through the debris south of the U. N. building to the edge of the river. He stood there a moment and stared upstream at the gaunt ruins of a bridge, now tumbled down the river and resting on the river-bottom, thrust-

ing its towers up beyond the surface of the water and toward the sky. Men had used that bridge once, long ago but within the memory of Johnny's father, to reach the country beyond. The bridge might be rebuilt. Men might learn to use it again. It was as if, in dying, Amos Westler had transferred his own vision to Johnny, showing him a dream of the unborn tomorrow — its birth or still-born death depending entirely upon Johnny's success or failure to-day.

Half a dozen Robots stood about the wide terrace leading to the building, but Johnny ignored them, for he had passed many in the broken streets of the city and grown accustomed to them. He entered the building through a door of glass and metal and was not aware of the Robots entering it behind him.

His impulse was to climb down from his Robot, to stretch his cramped arms and legs and find something to eat, then explore the wonders of this new place. Above his head, the ceiling was high and vaulted. Ramps led away, curving and graceful, in all directions and he longed to feel his feet, his own feet, upon them, and to explore until he satiated himself with this wonder and sought another.

To leave the Robot would be sui-

cide. Had the thought been his own—or a metal-made thought, instilled in him some unknown way, an unbidden suicide thought? It was less specific than the commands of the Robot that had perished in the repair bay, but Johnny guessed it came from outside nevertheless.

He advanced mechanically, for Westler had given him careful directions. The ramps led up, higher and higher, past the rooms in which men from many lands once, long ago, used to debate their future—then higher still, climbing . . .

There was noise behind him. He whirled in cramped quarters, peered from the Robot's second set of eyes. A dozen Robots climbed the ramp behind him, gaining. He let his mind drift blankly, let their thoughts reach him.

He is not wandering aimlessly. Somehow he learned. He learned. Capture him.

HE ran now, awkwardly, his own Robot not smooth and graceful, a flawless piece of machinery like the others. He clomped and clattered up the ramp and prayed for time.

The ramp soared upward, curved to the left. Once he looked down at the floor of the rotunda so far below and became giddy with the distance and the thought of falling.

He leaned over the railing and looked. His head whirled . . .

At the last moment, he drew his Robot back from the edge, stabbing half-blindly at the controls which propelled it. They had almost driven him to suicide. He must keep his mind a perfect blank—or, better still, think of something which would keep them at bay. Diane, his love for her—Diane . . .

A Robot waited for him at the top of the ramp. Those behind him were gaining rapidly, driving death-wishes deep within his brain.

The Robot above him abruptly swung into motion, but Johnny desperately sidestepped the lunge which would have sent him hurtling to the floor of the rotunda. The other Robot checked its own inertia and came for Johnny again, huge arms swinging, trying to crush him within the metal chamber as Amos Westler had been crushed. Johnny parried the blows with his own metal arms, then reached out and heard machinery groan within his metal frame as he lifted the other Robot and hurled it in the path of his pursuers.

There was a grinding, clattering crash of metal. Johnny saw three forms detach themselves from the arcing ramp and tumble, swinging and twisting in air grotesquely, to the floor, where they struck resoundingly and broke apart, the

metal arms and legs flying.

Then he was climbing again, the remaining Robots far below him and disorganized now. But soon, he knew, they would be capable of following.

It was as Amos Westler had predicted. After a time, the ramp grew smaller. It no longer climbed now—it had soared high and now was just below the girdered ceiling. It was hardly wide enough for Johnny's Robot, it shook dangerously with the tread of metal feet. Here, Johnny knew, was the sanctuary. This was the Achilles Heel. This was the entrance, this ramp which no Robot could traverse. Here the way led to self-functioning, self-repairing machinery, to Central Intelligence. Here was man's final hope in the eyes of the original inventor. Here was the guarantee that the Robots, if they became some Frankenstein monster, could be met and conquered.

For no Robot could guard the final portal to Central Intelligence. No Robot could even draw close enough to alter the thin ramp. Johnny smiled grimly as comprehension grew. If Robots could become neurotic, this was the place for it. They could have employed their human servants, the Shining Ones, to alter the place, but would have divulged their secret in the process.

Still smiling, Johnny halted his Robot, opened the face plate clumsily from the inside, and climbed out. He sat on the ramp and flexed stiff arms and legs, then stood up and heard the Robots below him. He could see them now, no longer advancing, milling about in confusion. Their weight would destroy the ramp, and they knew it. They could never hope to reach him.

It was all so incredibly simple. Was it?

One Robot had been above him.

Then they knew he was coming. What had they prepared for him beyond the point where the Robots could not climb? Shrugging, he advanced warily.

Soon he could see where the ramp reached a small doorway, much too low and narrow to admit a Robot, even if one of the machines could have climbed the ramp this far.

"Hold it,—Johnny Hope. Don't come any closer."

STARTLED, he looked up. Harry Starbuck stood in the doorway, holding Diane in front of him.

"I'm not fooling, Hope. If you come any closer I'll throw her off. It's a long way down."

"You're crazy, Starbuck. You'll never leave this place alive." But

even as he spoke, he knew he could never reason with the man. "The Robots can't let you carry their secret from here. Your only hope is to cooperate with me."

"Is that so? They're sending some more men up to get you. All I have to do is hold the fort until . . . cut it out, Hope! Stay right there." Starbuck edged out of the doorway, dragging Diane along with him to the railing at one side of the ramp. "I'll do it if you make me."

"Don't listen to him, Johnny! I'm not afraid." Hair disheveled, clothing torn, face bruised, she still looked beautiful to him. All at once she stood for everything Westler had mentioned; for the future of man, for the dreams of tomorrow, for a free world with no Plague and no Robots. But for Westler the choice would have been easy. The girl—or humanity.

Westler had not been in love.

Now Starbuck had forced Diane, back arched, breasts thrust forward, out over the railing. She struggled in his grip, but futilely. He could hurl her out over the edge and into space or not, as he wished.

"Back up, Hope. I want you to go back down the ramp and surrender to the Robots. You're only delaying things. More men will be here soon. You're licked and you know it."

Wearily, Johnny retreated. "Don't hurt her," he said. "Promise me that."

"You crazy? I want her for myself."

The thought numbed Johnny. He hadn't considered it that way. A live Diane or a dead one was one thing. But a Diane forced to submit to Starbuck . . .

He reached his own immobile Robot, saw the others, not twenty yards below him, waiting, thought he heard shouts somewhere behind them. He must do what he had come to do as if Diane did not exist. It was Starbuck who had made the choice for him.

But there was a wild possibility . . .

Quickly, he climbed within his Robot, activated it, lumbered forward. He could feel the ramp shaking with each step he took. At any moment, its struts might collapse and send him hurtling to his death, trapped in his man-shaped metal coffin, far below.

Soon he could see Starbuck again, on the ramp outside the doorway, holding Diane. Starbuck's eyes went wide. Starbuck frowned, then began to lick his lips anxiously.

"You can't come up here!" he cried. "It won't hold you. I sent the man down to surrender, anyway. Do you have him? Is he

dead? What do you want, anyway? I can come down myself. Don't come any closer, not unless you want the ramp to collapse. Keep away, you hear me?"

Johnny advanced slowly, the ramp shaking with each stride no longer, but dipping and rocking constantly now, almost ready to go. Starbuck retreated, taking Diane with him. Through the doorway they went—

Out fell the faceplate of Johnny's Robot. He tumbled after it as the ramp shook, metal grinding against metal, then snapped. He leaped forward as the ramp caved in. He felt his feet shoot out from under him, saw metal dropping away, twisting, to his left. He clawed out with his hands, gripped a jagged edge, pulled himself up slowly as blood made his hands slip.

He stood in what was left of the doorway, trembling as reaction set in, his heels on the brink of nothing, his bloodied hands aching.

Starbuck roared and charged at him, attempting to drive him back a few inches to his death. But Johnny caught him, met him half-way with no room to evade the charge, and they grappled there, teetering on the edge.

"You tricked me," Starbuck moaned. "That Robot . . . was you."

A KNEE blurred up at Johnny, exploding in violent pain: He felt himself falling and managed to twist away from the edge of the sundered ramp. He hit the floor with waves of nausea boiling up from his stomach. He lay there, blinking his eyes.

Starbuck came for him.

He drew his legs up instinctively, the knees bent, then straightened as Starbuck leaned over him. His feet caught the big man squarely on the chest, lifted him, pushed

Starbuck went over the edge of the ramp, screaming all the way down.

Inside, Johnny found Diane, dazed, on the floor. He ignored her. She could wait, for now he was a man possessed. The machinery which he could never hope to understand was all about him bank on bank of it lining the walls, humming with its strange, sentient energy, glowing and flickering, with a million lights.

Kill yourself.

Two words, clamoring, insistent, inside his skull. Their final hope . . . He felt himself edging back toward the doorway, and the death which awaited him just outside. He looked at Diane, huddled on the floor, her lips parted—"Johnny . . ."

I love you, he thought. The words of death and those of life

and hope fought inside his skull, twisting his brain, battling there for mastery . . .

He found something, a length of metal rod. He ripped it loose and began to attack the machinery he would never understand. He was a wild man. The strength flowed in from elsewhere, raising his arm, swinging it high over his head and down. Sparks flew as his metal club battered the crystalline tubes, the delicate wiring, the metal cases. Glass shattered, sprinkled him, brought blood from a dozen cuts on his face. Electricity hummed, then shrieked, then wailed off distantly on a register too high for his ears.

Raise his arm and plunge . . . lift it and bring it down, battering, the metal club part of him . . .

It was Diane who eased the twisted rod from his fingers, soothed him with her words. "It's finished. Easy, Johnny. You've done it."

The place was a shambles. Bank on bank of gutted machinery lay silent there, on a floor strewn with glass, with wire, with filaments, with nameless things which were the brains for a million Robots.

"There's another way out, Johnny. Starbuck took me here. Behind that wall, you—"

She took his hand and they went.

The passage was dark and cool and smelled musty; as if air did not circulate very well within it. It was a place for thinking and dreaming of tomorrow. It was, a place for realizing you could go back to the hills and find Keleher and his Shining Ones and convince them they should at least look at the City, the City which belonged to them now, to them and DeReggio and his villagers—and all the others. And there must be a coming together of Keleher and DeReggio, with Johnny as mediator, and a realization that the last Plague victim had been smitten and humanity had a long path to travel but could set foot upon it right now, at once.

Outside, it was growing dark, but Johnny could make out the still forms of the Robots, gleaming red with final sunlight, sprawled upon the broken streets. The Shining Ones within the City stalked about furtively in small groups, not yet knowing what it meant to live without their masters. Perhaps in time Keleher and all the others could teach them.

"Hungry?" said Johnny. "We could stop and eat."

"No. You?"

"In a different way."

They followed the last slanting rays of the sun to the western river and the mainland beyond it.



RECEPTION COMMITTEE

by

Len Guttridge

What sort of reaction could the aliens expect from an Earthman's first sight of them? They had considered all possibilities — but one!

THEY floated down out of a cloud-littered spring sky, landing softly on the neat grass. The leader waited for the rest of the advance party to assemble. His second-in-command drew up, floundering unsteadily. Then another, a third, a fourth. They struggled across the alien ground, weak from long confinement in the vessel now moored out of sight beyond the clouds.

Seven, eight, nine. They grouped around the leader and their limbs waved gleefully while the several mouths of each set up an excited chatter. They were safe. They were alive.

They were safe although it was

broad daylight and a few *men* creatures of the planet turned heads in their direction. The leader noticed the straight paths, the tidily-cut grass, the orderly white- and red buildings (doubtless dwellings for the *men*) in the distance.

Above all, he watched the *men*.

As they slowly approached, he felt a new confidence. Their appearance was not entirely a shock. He had been well briefed on earth shapes during the planning course for this expedition. Still, with their simple symmetry of limbs, their (at first) repulsive slack of mouths — they had only one each — there was a, signally monstrous austerity about them.

But his team had been carefully trained to conquer any instinctive fear, hostility or disgust that direct contact with earth life might produce. They had, in fact, been intensively conditioned to respond to strange shapes with one primary reaction—friendliness.

The leader was relieved to observe that the oncoming *men*, for their part, had clearly defeated whatever revulsion his party's appearance caused. There was, naturally, a certain hesitance in their step. And when the leader ordered his crew to silence, the *men* faltered and paused.

The nearest one spoke. "Is anybody taking care of you?"

The leader groped in his mind for the earth-words he had acquired. His chief criticism of the preparatory course back home had been the inadequacy of the basic language phase. Now he felt ill-equipped to match such a matter-of-fact greeting.

"We are friends," he said finally.

The sun burst between two clouds and flooded the scene with bright warmth. The leader was suddenly moved by the high and awful importance of this moment. He shook with emotion. Again he said, "We are friends," and could not convey the words through only one mouth.

Evidently, though, the *men* continued to regard this as a most casual encounter rather than the greatest thing that ever happened. One said, "You fellows are a bit early, I think. Mr. Spence is supposed to meet you. Sort of show you around."

Questioning murmurs and grunts came from the visitors. Mouths opened and twisted at each other and the sky, puzzled eyes flashed and blinked, a small forest of shiny limbs shrugged and pointed. The leader studied the men keenly. Some wore half-amused but amiable expressions. Others, farther off, strolled contentedly across the grass or sat on blue benches under the trees, or stood in small groups, talking. All quite unconcerned and certainly unafraid.

"Tell you what," said the nearest earth creature with a youthful eagerness, "Ronnie here and I will take you to Mr. Spence's house. On the way, anything you want to know, just ask. Of course," he chuckled, "we won't be too good at it, you understand. But we'll do our best. Eh, Ronnie?"

He nudged his companion who smiled. Ronnie looked much older than the first *man* and stooped slightly. But he straightened now and there was a military ring in his voice as he commanded, "Ready? Then follow us."

THE two *men* set off along the gravel path towards the far building. In single file behind them, the leader and his crew plodded and shuffled. All the leader's mouths smiled at the solemn manner in which they tried to pace their ambulatory limbs in strides similar to those of the *men*. The effect was faintly comical but assured the leader that his group was confident, if curious. Already they were imitating, perhaps unconsciously, the habits of their hosts. It was a good sign.

Ronnie called over his shoulder, "Any you chaps speak English?"

The leader said, "Some words. Not many. We are friends." And felt sheepish.

"I suppose you came a long way. How did you get in? Coach? Plane?"

The leader's mind examined this for some moments. Then brightly he answered, "We fly."

"Good for you." Ronnie fumbled in his pocket and wheeled on the followers. The first pang of fear pierced their complacency and they crowded together. The *man* pointed a small box at them with white cylinders protruding. He said, "Smoke, anyone?"

The leader's eyes narrowed. A side mouth spoke rapidly to his second-in-command. Orders were passed along to the others and

weapons, long sheathed, were readied. The leader said, "No."

The man took a cylinder, placed it in his mouth, made fire with his hands and brought it up carefully to the thing in his mouth. One of the leader's limbs waggled swiftly in mid-air. The weapon vanished. The tension died.

The procession of two earthmen and the visitors who were unimaginably unlike them, drew nearer the building. The path curved gracefully and a massive gate came into view with ornate railings stretching on both sides. Ronnie said, "Guess you're all pretty tired. Don't know what sort of a program Spence has fixed up for you. First item on it should be chow, eh?"

The followers exchanged stares. They shuffled in silence.

"Yes," said their leader.

"Yes. Yes," said all the mouths at once.

"Quite a party," said Ronnie to his companion. "Spence'll have a shock."

"Oh, I don't know. It isn't as if they weren't expected. Say," he said over his shoulder, "you're not all from the same place, are you?"

Pause. Shuffle. Shuffle. "Yes." "Yes, yes."

"A government delegation? Or private?"

"We are friends. Spence. He

is your ruler?"

"Ruler? Old Spence?" The *man* laughed. "You might call him that."

Ron said, "Well, he'll handle you better than we can." He grasped the other's arm abruptly. "Wonder if there are any Indians in this bunch?"

"Lord knows. Why?"

"Might make better progress. Try out a little Hindi I picked up during the war." He turned and addressed them in Hindi. They smiled at him without comprehension. One of them extended an affectionate purple limb. Before it could contact, the leader tugged it back, three mouths growling a warning.

"No one from India?" said Ronnie. "Well, no harm in trying."

THEY had reached the buildings. Through the trees, beyond the railings, the leader could see large colored vessels running to and fro. A quick, loud shriek switched his attention back to the buildings. He saw faces, which he remembered as earth *women*, fill windows, like little pale wedges of terror, then vanish with more screams.

A sick dread seized him and touched the others. "What's all the racket?" said Ronnie up ahead, walking to a half-opened door.

Then he called, "You there, Mr. Spence? That foreign delegation's arrived to tour the home. All set to meet them?"

A short fat *man* emerged. Gently he moved Ronnie to one side and stared at the visitors. "My God," he said. "Oh, God, oh, God." Quickly he pulled the other two inside and slammed the door.

The leader's heart beat fiercely, stepped up by a confused fear. Earthmen still walked over the placid green not exhibiting the horror Spence had. A few had paused at the uproar and now resumed their strolling.

But an angry mistrust burned within the leader now. Swiftly he slithered across to the gate, the others following. They were on the highway down which the colored vessels raced. There were many more *men* out here. They stopped, then ran, screaming. Some fell. The vessels banged into each other and flamed. Chaos spread up and down the highway.

As more vessels gathered and *men* sprang from them levelling hateful weapons, the visitors huddled together, countless mouths quivering, furious limbs threshing the air. The leader snapped orders for defense but lulled by the friendliness on the other side of the gates, his crew were oh, so slow in responding. The damage had

been done.

Fire and metal tore their flesh and they fell, one by one, dismayed and bewildered by this new attitude of the *men*. They fell, utterly incapable of the drastic psychological change essential to their self-preservation.

As the leader backed clumsily against the railings, new earth words were added to his store, words tossed and screamed and shudderingly sighed from the great crowd of *men* now closing in.

"God, how ugly . . ."

"Ghastly . . . revolting . . ."

Then he was hit and flopped to the ground. As his second-in-command whipped supporting

limbs about him, all his mouths hurled bitter words into the tranquil region beyond the railings. "Deceivers . . . pretending to be friends . . . while guiding us to THIS!"

The leader's crew were scattered around him, lumps of death on an alien world. He tumbled into the gutter with a last lingering notion that perhaps, *perhaps* there was a mistake, something overlooked, omitted back home . . .

Just before he died, the leader looked up at the sign over the gate, *Birkwood Home For The Blind* and didn't know what it meant.

The End

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *William L. Hamling* ★

(Continued from Page 2)

now. I never look at the moon and stars without feeling that thus far in my life I've really been cheated; someday men will not look at the stars — they'll visit them. I'd hock my place in eternity to be one of those men. For the stars are man's destiny; this pebble we now reside upon is merely an incubator being warmed by our own parent star, Sol, until the day when man leaves his cocoon, and journeys forth into the heart of creation—outer space.

I felt this way the first time I became aware that the sky was not just a ceiling over my childhood home; and I suppose this explains why science fiction became the focal point of my later activities. For only in science fiction can the future happen—now. So writing about it, or publishing what others write about it, brings me close to the great adventure of man in the centuries ahead.

All of which makes me a dreamer, I suppose. But the realities of

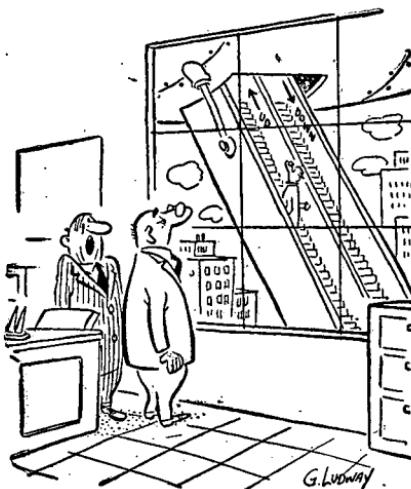
presentday science were once dreams, so I consider dreaming to be the motivating force behind progress. I'm all for progress, and feel confident it will put man on the Moon within my lifetime. *That* much I will live to see.

* Unfortunately all of my life in the past has not been taken up with science fiction. There was that hitch of a couple of years war service back in the early forties; a few reams of detective, mystery, and western stories to various magazines. My editorial schooling at Ziff-Davis as managing editor of a flock of publications, favorites being *Fantastic Adventures* and

Amazing Stories. Five pleasant and educational years that prepared me for *IMAGINATION*, the answer to one of my favorite science fiction dreams—publishing my own magazine. Along the way I married the most charming girl in the world, and we have some of the finest kids ever slated for careers as space pilots or a Mars run hostess.

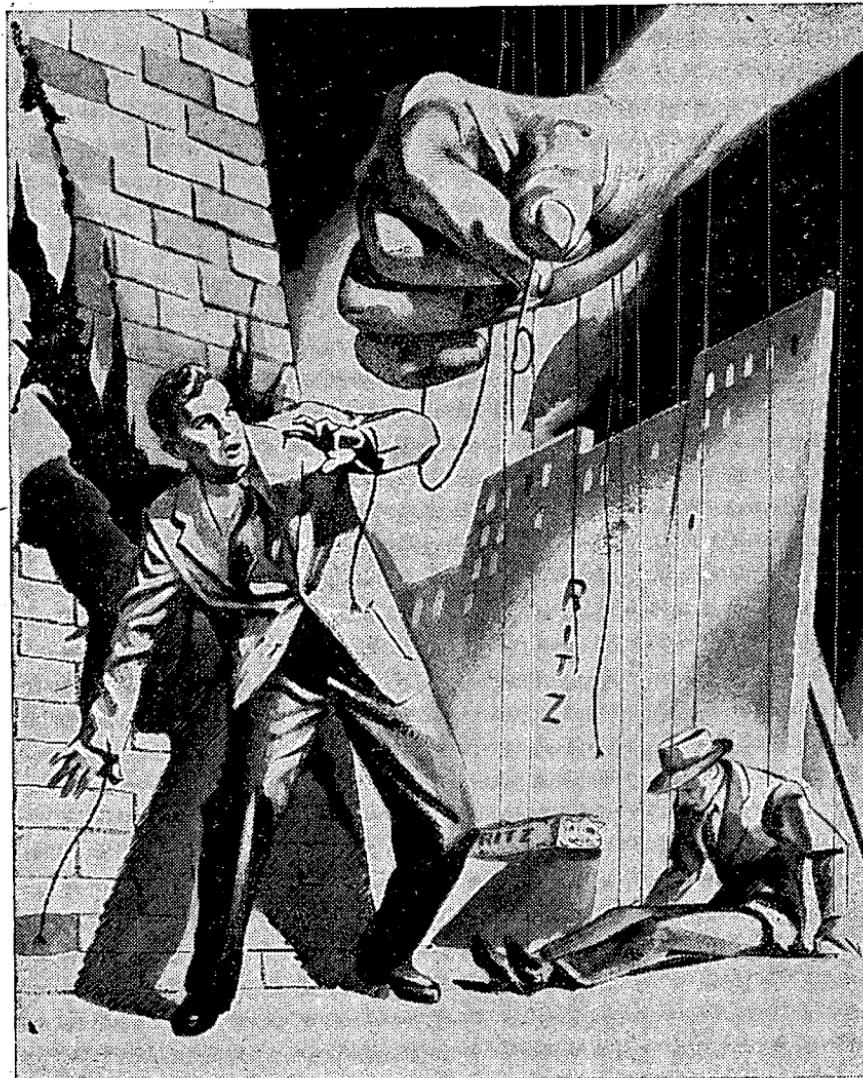
You think that's stretching the imagination too far? I don't think so. And in the meantime we'll let it run wild in the pages of this magazine. Yours—and mine.

—William L. Hamling



**"Just how big is this space ship
Professor Fruppt is building?"**

**As Craig worked his puppets with strings
he had the strange feeling that somehow he too
was being controlled. Yet he feared to prove —**



... The World Is But A Stage

by

Daniel F. Galouye

CRAIG Conway sat rigid in his chair in front of the dressing room table, staring abstractly into the large, square mirror set in its halo of warm, bright light bulbs.

The cigarette dropped from his fingers and fell soundlessly on the rug, its gray smoke contaminated by the acrid, black vapors of burning nap.

Numbly, he pondered the unaccountable sense of detachment that had suddenly seized him. It was like awakening from a deep, dreamless sleep, his mind clear, his body fresh, his thoughts alert.

He stared down at his left arm, hanging limp.

Hesitating, he raised it, clenched and unclenched the fist . . . It moved! Hadn't it always? Of course, he acknowledged. But it was different now. There was a hyperconscious sense of connection between the decision to use the arm and the execution of movement. By comparison, throughout his life the volition to activate it had seemed to come simultaneous

with the movement—a manifestation he had accepted as indicating a normal degree of co-ordination.

But now it was as though he could, for the first time, pre-ordain clearly what he wanted the hand to do. He ordered it to his face, to touch his cheek lightly.

It did.

He tried the same motion with the other hand. In contrast, there was an undeniable sensation of automatism that made the movement seem almost subconsciously directed.

"On in five minutes," the soft, feminine voice called from the doorway.

He continued to stare intently at the hand.

"Time to pull the strings, Craig," the girl reminded, insistently but laughing.

Still he didn't move.

She gasped. Then there was a rustling of taffeta across the floor and she was beside him, her small foot stamping at the fallen cigarette and its encompassing area of smoldering carpet.

"Craig!" she exclaimed as she extinguished the last spark.

He started, finally aware of her presence, and rose.

She turned reprimandingly. "You haven't been thinking again—about your . . . hand?"

He frowned. "But it's true, Laura!"

She sighed, failing to hide the despair in the gesture.

"You've got to forget about it, darling!" She grasped his arms solicitously. "There's nothing wrong!"

"Then it's an hallucination?"

"It's an—obsession of some sort. Like Hermann said." She looked away, as though regretting the use of the word.

Don't you see, Craig?" she continued. This is an unusual production. Who would have thought a marionette show would draw better than anything else on Broadway? It had to be unique to reach the top."

"And," he interrupted harshly, "because the show is unusual it's affecting my mind?"

"No." She almost shouted it. "Perhaps, like Hermann says, it's causing some sort of obsession and —"

"But just with me! Not with you. Not with him, or Stumpy!"

"Of course just you—if anybody. I control a bunch of pup-

pets. Hermann directs another set. But you control three marionettes and a midget—a midget who plays the part of a character in the process of learning he's a puppet and breaking loose at the climax."

Craig laughed dryly. "Because I handle a puppet that suddenly comes to life and snaps off his strings, I start imagining that I'm a puppet coming to life and snapping off *my* strings. A subconscious extension, I suppose."

Her small mouth opened, closed again in frustration.

"Do you want to quit the production?" she asked softly.

"No." He began pacing. "No. We'd have to close the show until Hermann could train another string puller. And I know what this means to that damned Dutchman." The last two words were said affectionately.

He stopped and faced her. "I know this means everything for all of us, darling . . . Why, in another week we'll have all those binoculars paid for. Almost everything that comes in after that will be profit."

His face twisted into a frown as he tried to elude her concerned stare. "If only I can get over this idea that my arm . . ."

Craig didn't complete the sentence. Instead, his left hand reached out to the table and shook a

cigarette from an open pack. He placed it between his lips.

Then he was motionless for perhaps a minute, his face dampening, his shoulders trembling.

"Craig!" she exclaimed apprehensively.

"I—I can't light it!" he shouted, the cigarette dropping from his mouth. "Don't you understand? I got the cigarette with my *left* hand. But it *wasn't time* for me to smoke! I can't use the other hand to strike a match!"

STUMPY walked independently among the half dozen puppets on the brilliantly lighted stage below. He wasn't an excessively misproportioned midget. There was a slimness to his limbs and torso that made him appear almost normal.

Leaning far out over the double-bridge stage and looking down on the marionettes and the living figure, Craig paid only token attention to the action below.

The play, in its third act, was at a point where gestures and actions substituted for dialogue to maintain suspense.

Stumpy, walking in an exaggerated mechanical step, was pacing, still portraying a marionette who had not completely severed his strings.

Craig kept the cords taut to en-

hance the illusion of puppetry in the midget's motions.

"Listen to that audience!" It was Hermann's enthusiastic whisper and chuckle that filled the backstage area.

Out of the corner of his eye, Craig studied the old man's complacent smile as the other deftly manipulated one of the figures.

The marionette rose from a divan, stepped over to Stumpy and went through the motion of whispering into his ear.

"The audience? I can't hear them," Laura said, not taking her eyes from the two girl puppets she was directing in a gliding walk across stage.

"Of course you can't!" Hermann said excitedly, his small, eager eyes darting in her direction. "Not even in the old country were they ever this spellbound."

He was dressed in a black robe. His face was a monstrous, painted mask, grotesque teeth protruding like snakes carved from blood-stained ivory.

Stumpy turned to the heroine who stood tensely before him, the shadows from the special off-stage light limning the carved anxiety and terror in her face.

"They're here, Kit!" the midget shouted dramatically. "Can't you see them? The strings, Kit!"

"I—I don't see anything," Laura

spoke the words for the marionette; spoke them into the microphone that hung before her on the rear bridge.

Stumpy shouted hoarsely, glanced up, terror on his face, and cowered. Craig followed his motions with the strings, keeping them taut.

Then the midget frantically swept a hand over his other wrist, snapping the cord that extended from there to Craig's controller.

Craig tensed and his hand fumbled with the complex of bars, trembling. It was as though he were the principal character in the play below instead of Stumpy, he realized. Everything that had happened to the midget thus far in the drama had seemed to happen to him.

"Craig!" Hermann's frantic whisper exploded in his ear. "The butler! It's time to bring the butler onstage!"

Craig started, almost lost his balance. He caught the rail to steady himself. Hastily, he snatched up the proper control bar and brought the butler on with his left hand.

But he stiffened again under the impact of another inexplicable impression—one that suggested undeniably that he had lived this very incident before; that it had been so indelibly inscribed on his

memory that he could almost predict what would occur next.

He snapped from his stupor, trying to remember his new character's lines. But he couldn't.

Laura, manipulating the marionette Kit in crude, unreal motions, jumped the play's continuity; putting Kit through a scream and a faint. The butler turned and went back offstage, his hesitant actions reflecting the confusion Craig felt as he controlled the figure.

Now Stumpy was in violent motion, snapping the strings from his elbows, knees, ankles, head.

The other puppets slumped in individual heaps as Hermann and Laura lowered their control bars to special racks on the side of the bridges.

The stage lights dimmed.

Stumpy cowered and threw his hands over his head, looking up as a spotlight circled him.

He screamed.

Murmurs of apprehension rose from the audience.

Then Hermann lay on the bridge and thrust his head and arms below the curtain, in full view of the audience.

The midget screamed louder; let his voice trail off in a whimper of terror and despair.

Hermann's hand, with its grotesquely curving false nails, seized Stumpy by the shoulder. The mid-

get feined a faint. Hermann lifted his limp body and, with his other hand, reattached the strings to the eyelets in his clothes.

The old man withdrew from the sight of the audience and the play moved through its denouement.

CRaIG followed the master puppeteer to his dressing room.

"Sorry I fouled it up," he said, standing in the doorway.

Hermann massaged his face brusquely with a towel, removing the malevolent features.

"Nothing lost," he shrugged.

"You could get Anders in," Craig suggested. "He knows most of the action and dialogue."

Hermann turned and stared at him sympathetically. "I am sorry for you Craig. For you and Laura."

"But what can I do?"

"Leave the show? Perhaps that would be best. But I would not like to see that . . . Fight the obsession?" He spread his hands impassively. "I recall the war—the concentration camps. It wasn't hard to acquire a complex then. I doubted that there was a kind human being in the entire world. Even after I came to this country, I knew I was going to kill myself. But there was one day when a toothless little girl sat on my knee in a park and said, 'Gee, mister,

you look just like Santa Claus without a beard' . . ."

"I don't know." Craig shook his head sullenly. "I don't know the answers . . . Why am I bothered with the illusion of memory — paramnesia? Why do I always feel there's something—big all around me? So big that I can't begin to see it or comprehend it?"

Hermann grasped his shoulder. "Puppetry is a rather strange art. You try so intently to create the illusion of reality that you find yourself almost imagining the characters alive. Some try so hard that instead of simulating reality in their dolls, the marionettes tend to create the illusion of unreality in the operators."

He nodded toward one of the wooden dolls on his dressing table; laughed. "Franz here is often so real to me that I wonder whether I appear real to him."

Hermann turned back to Craig. "How much simpler is my complex than yours! At times I imagine the marionette people are real. You imagine the real ones are marionettes."

Craig laughed dryly. "But where will I find a little girl in a park?"

"I was fortunate. I found a solid, real cure for the idea that I was hated. Your little girl will have to come here." He tapped

his head.

"But the illusion is so real!"

"It wouldn't be a convincing one if it weren't."

"I *know* there's something wrong with my arm! Something so strange that it's never been wrong with anybody else's arm before!"

"All right, Craig," the old man sighed impatiently. "You feel as though your left arm and hand are the only free members of your body. Everything else is—dependent on an unknown power for its motion. You say it's as though you were a sentient marionette with a string broke loose . . . "

"I only used that as an analogy. Of course I realize it was an insane description. Maybe the whole thing can be explained on the basis of predeterminism versus free will. Maybe there is such a force as predeterminism. Maybe—".

Hermann cleared his throat, indicating he thought the subject a divergent one. "If your arm, as you say, is free, why does it not act independently—out of phase with the motions of your body—all the time?"

"It would," Craig answered eagerly, "if I'd let it. But so much of me is under direction that it's not difficult to know what the independent arm should be doing at any particular moment."

"In other words," Hermann ask-

ed, "you've just thrust your left hand in your pocket because the predetermined movement of the rest of your body gave you the clues you needed to know you were going to put your hands in your pockets?"

"Something like that."

HERMANN knelt suddenly and untied one of Craig's shoe strings.

"Tie it," he directed, rising.

Frowning, Craig lifted his foot to a chair and reached for the dangling ends of the lace.

Hermann caught his left wrist in a firm grip.

Craig straightened, looking askance at the other.

Hermann laughed. "See? If you were really dependent on some force of predeterminism from which your left hand was exempt, your right would carry through its half of the action required to retie your shoe."

Craig frowned for a moment. Then, "No, Hermann. Don't you see that the rest of me and all of you would still be under direction? The right hand wouldn't have gone through with the motion, even if only to create the false conviction that my trouble is only in the nature of an illusion!"

Hermann's humoring smile faded. "If we grant your assump-

tion that your hand is acting independently, we must also concede you are thinking freely. Otherwise the movement of the free arm would make no impression on your mind. And, since we are *discussing* your condition, then whatever is directing us must be aware of your partial release . . . Why doesn't he, or it, do something about it—bring you completely back under its power before you gain total freedom?"

"Maybe it will!" Craig looked up sharply, his face awry with alarm. "Just like you brought Stumpy back under control in the play . . . I'm afraid, Hermann!"

The old man placed a hand warmly on his shoulder. "Craig, at times I like to think of you as George. My son was a fine boy. And it wasn't his fault that his rifle was pointed the wrong way in the war. If you were my son I would not feel embarrassed in suggesting a psychiatrist."

He reached into his pocket and brought out a card. "So, I was only a little embarrassed when I made an appointment for you for tomorrow morning. Here's the doctor's card."

The master puppeteer walked slowly from the room.

Craig was motionless for perhaps a minute. Then he put the card in his billfold. He glanced

down at his shoe and bent to tie it.

But impulsively, he dropped the lace from his left hand and held that arm around behind him.

He shuddered as he watched the right hand continue unperturbed in its unaccompanied, ineffective motion of tying the string.

CRAIG walked glumly from the psychiatrist's office. Laura rose from the reception room chair and fell in beside him. They went slowly down the hall.

"Bad? Or good?" She reached out to take his arm.

"He says my trouble is an unresolved emotional conflict," he said, staring ahead. "It's supposed to be responsible for the psychosis."

"Which means . . . ?"

"I told him about the arm; you; Hermann . . . even Hermann's son. He thinks I've got a guilt complex because I was fighting on the side that was responsible for George's death. I'm supposed to hate my hand because it helped kill the son of a man I'm fond of."

Craig laughed emotionlessly. "The compulsive reaction, it seems, is to free the hand from the behavior pattern that I interpret as being responsible for George's death."

They rode the elevator down silently.

"The paramnesia," he said, squinting in the sunlight, "is the result of a suppressed desire to relive the past and correct the mistake of being a killer in uniform."

They reached the car and got in. Stumpy sat in the back, his legs jutting forward horizontally but failing to clear the edge of the seat. He eyed them silently.

"What does Dr. Barron advise?" Laura asked.

"Thinks he can help me with further psychoanalysis. But he wants me to try to fight it out for myself first."

She frowned incomprehendingly.

"Says I ought to try to push the illusion; force it to a climax and see what happens. He has an idea that my cure might lie in *freeing* all my faculties. Seems to believe I'll establish a higher level of—body unity, I guess—and will forget about the whole thing when the illusion that one part of my body is different from the rest no longer exists."

Stumpy laughed. "Did you tell him you feel like you're a marionette?"

Craig didn't answer.

"Hell, you oughta be down on the stage instead of me." The midget bit the end off a cigar and wedged it between his teeth where it dwarfed his features. "You could really put something into the rôle."

ATER, Craig paced restlessly in his hotel room, stopping occasionally to stare out the window.

Push the illusion to its fruition, Dr. Barron had advised. But how? What could he do?

He stood before the window, his hands thrust uselessly in his pockets, fighting the sensation of helplessness. Below, a stream of stalled automobiles waited restlessly for a jam to clear at the corner. The sidewalk was cluttered with pedestrians, but their remoteness seemed to minimize their motion until it was almost as though they were standing still.

It was like looking at a picture—a bit of hastily painted stage scenery. For a moment he shrank under the impression that he was utterly detached from the panorama of frozen motion and sound.

Then again came the sensation that he had lived the incident before—had stood in this exact position, with the very same solicitudes, and had watched the identical scene!

Sounds returned, the painting rippled with movement and the characters resumed interrupted motion. He backed away from the window, almost fearful that if he continued to stare at the things below they would shamefully fade from reality.

Suddenly he was cowering in the

center of the room. The seizure of hallucinations was not finished! His head throbbed with the inscrutable impression of being a vague part of something grandiose all around him. Something of an immensity which he couldn't begin to understand.

Frantically, he spun around. But there was nothing except the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the furniture—the furniture that suddenly looked as though it might break or crumble if he sat upon it too forcefully.

And the frightening impression of unbounded bigness persisted. He trembled, tried to close his eyes, like a boy afraid of the dark but more afraid of seeing what might be there—waiting.

If only he could look in the right direction! Then he might discern what it was that reached out to him with its impressive immensity! He tried. But there were only the walls.

Stumpy had tried — in the play! Stumpy had looked in the right direction! And when the midget had acquired the ability to see what there was to be seen, he had also become capable of detecting—the strings!

Dr. Barron had said he was to force the obsession to its climax. Did that mean he, too, would have to find the imaginary strings and

break loose from them — like Stumpy had?

He brought his left arm up; felt around his other wrist, elbow.

He laughed at his own ludicrous behavior.

Slapping his left ankle and knee, violently, he swept his arm in furious half circles through the air around the two joints.

Feeling even sillier, he stopped. Morosely, he returned to pacing.

But there was a scraping noise. It was coming from his left foot, which was dragging as though partially paralyzed, while the right continued to pace unconcernedly!

He tried to stop walking — but couldn't! Fighting the motion in the right limb, he tripped and fell.

Dumbfounded, he clung to the carpet, afraid to move. He wanted to lie and think. But the rebellious half of his body was uncompromising.

Craig fought desperately against returning to his feet; he grasped the leg of the bed and clung to it.

But his right hand reached out to push him away.

He stuck his left shoe up in the spring coils, wedged it there.

But his right leg kicked out furiously, repelling him from the bed.

He screamed.

There was a shrill, ringing noise.

Surrendering, he rose and staggered to the telephone table, numb

with an indescribable apprehension. "Craig!" It was Hermann.

He heard himself answer.

"It's only fifteen minutes before curtain time!"

Dazed, he dropped the phone back into its cradle, scarcely impressed by the old man's urgent reminder.

He started to drop, stupefied, into the chair.

But his right foot swung out in front of him determinedly and then he was walking toward the door.

IT was a horrifying nightmare that held his mind in an almost senseless grip as he strode toward the theater.

Was it as Hermann had suggested—that he might become progressively freer? Had the psychiatrist suspected he might be wracked by these—unreal?—experiences should he try to gain imaginary release for more of his faculties?

He tried to hurry, but his right leg stubbornly refused to step faster and his right arm was undisturbed in its synchronized swing.

Craig glanced at the hand . . . and started. For a moment it was as though he could almost see something vague—something previously indescribable — connected to the arm. A string? He laughed grim-faced. God! He had to have more faith in his sanity than to

start imagining invisible cords.

But the illusion persisted. It was like an immaterial, barely perceptible—aura? He brushed at it with his other hand. It seemed to waver, like a dissipating mist, and vanish.

Abruptly the arm no longer swung in time with the recalcitrant right foot!

He thought of Stumpy at the climax of the play—of the midget suddenly perceiving the strings and snapping them loose.

Could he do the same—now! Could he, in a violent, crazed display of defiance, wrench his other leg free—his entire body?

Unperturbed, his right leg strode boldly down the sidewalk. Dazed the rest of his body followed.

Again, he tried to resist being dragged by the incomprehensible force. He stumbled and almost lost his balance. His flailing arm landed roughly against the shoulder of an elderly woman walking even with him.

Sanity returned briefly and he started to apologize. But she did not even look in his direction.

Experimentally, he touched her on the shoulder as she continued to walk next to him. Again, there was no response!

Terrified, he shouted hoarsely. No one looked at him.

With the back of his hand, he

slapped a man across the shoulder as the other passed him. The man did not turn.

Craig shouted despairingly again. And again the outburst went unnoticed.

Then a calming numbness swept over him and he had control of himself once more. Involuntarily, he hastened his steps toward the theater.

He glanced into the mirrored front of a store, squinting to detect the vague aura around his face, eyes, neck.

Frantically, he brought his hands up to his face and brushed them over his eyes. Had he *freed* them? Would he now be able to see what there was to be seen if he looked in the right direction? He reached down for his right leg.

But he hesitated and let his hands drop to his side. The 'controls' that were still attached to his body would offer the only clues to what he *should* be doing at any particular moment. If he severed them completely, then he would be . . . lost! He would not know what his role was! And his independence would be too apparent to —whatever force it was from which he was partially independent!

An intelligent force? he wondered . . . Was it aware he was escaping? The fact that it had directed Hermann in a conversation

regarding his developing freedom indicated it was *totally* aware.

Did it *want* him to break loose? But why?

Craig gasped. Abruptly he realized he must be under its constant surveillance! Almost, cowering as he walked, he glanced around him, into the sky. But there was nothing anywhere of an unusual nature.

Almost nothing . . . Was there something different about the sky? About the shape of the buildings in the distance? The inexplicable impression that he had felt while looking out the hotel window returned. Why should he think everything around him was like a scene painted on canvas?

A cloud swirled over the sun as he reached the theater and the impression of mock unreality was gone. But not the sensation that he was being watched . . . by something tremendous, unbounded in its power and greatness!

BACKSTAGE, Hermann and Laura were already on the bridges.

"Hurry, Craig!" she whispered as he climbed the ladder.

Hermann reprimanded, "We're twenty minutes late!"

Craig clambered up the last few rungs and stood beside Laura as she retrieved two marionette control bars from their racks and

handed them to him. Hermann leaned over the rail to whisper instructions to the stage hands.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"It's no illusion, Laura!" he exclaimed. "I've freed more of myself! And the people on the streets! They don't . . . ?"

"Well, you should have had lunch sooner. You knew we had a matinee."

He jolted. "Don't you understand?" He held up his hands. "They respond to *my* direction now and . . . ?"

She smiled, her eyes failing to focus on his face. "After the performance? Of course. I have no other plans."

"Laura!"

She smiled broader, flaring out the skirt of her evening dress with her hands. "Yes, it's new. I got it today. Thought you'd like it."

Wracked with horror, he tried to back away. But his right foot would not relinquish its grip on the floor.

"Curtains!" Hermann whispered suddenly.

Now the foot moved. It took him into his proper position.

But still, even as he brought his first marionette on stage, he stared unbelievingly at Laura. In the half-light that enveloped the platform he wondered whether he couldn't discern faint auras around

her wrists, elbows, legs — pale, weird, thin lines of force or attenuated matter that seemed to extend upward? He looked up, but saw only the curtain brace-work.

Stupefied, he controlled his characters mechanically through the first act. When it was over he relaxed on the rear bridge as Laura and Hermann went down.

He started to lean against the rail to arrange his thoughts into a semblance of logical order. But the recalcitrant leg stepped off to follow the old man and the girl. Gasping, he beat furiously at the leg, running his hands frantically around the ankle, knee.

The restless foot surrendered to motionlessness.

Numbly, he looked over the rail. Laura, stepping from the last rung of the ladder, stopped and glanced back.

"Really, Craig," her voice drifted up to him as she spoke to an area of nothingness in front of her, "we were worried about you when it looked like you weren't going to show up."

Her hand came up to her side and took a portion of the nothingness that would have been his arm had he been down there with her. Then she strode off toward the dressing rooms.

Stumpy, coming off the marionette stage, caught up with her.

"Had us worried, Craig," he said, looking up at the unoccupied space next to Laura.

Craig clung to the rail and closed his eyes despairingly. He couldn't talk with her! When he tried, she answered to sentences which he hadn't spoken.

Was he completely independent now? He remembered he had seen many vague line-like auras around his head. Impulsively and in a frantic motion, he flailed his hands about his face, neck, as though trying to fight off a swarm of bees. Then he fell back against the rail, trembling in bewilderment and fright.

Minutes passed. Then Laura came back up the ladder, looking over her shoulder to talk to a Craig who wasn't there.

Hermann climbed up and the marionette play went into its second act. Craig executed the movements and provided the voices of his characters indifferently, not even trying to cast off the stupor that blanketed him.

IT was almost at the end of the act when he looked down and started. In his daze he had brought the butler onstage instead of Alice, the siren of the play, and had put the male marionette's arms affectionately around Stumpy.

But, apparently not noticing his

mistake, Laura supplied Alice's lines as he manipulated the butler's mouth in conversation.

And the midget seemed to be unaware that it was the servant instead of the siren who was making love to him!

Craig stiffened. No one — not Hermann, not Laura, *not even the audience*—had noticed the mistake!

Perspiration formed on his forehead as he angrily jerked on the butler's control bar. The marionette lunged up from the stage and he caught it in his hand.

And still the play went on as though nothing had happened!

Now he heard it—the annoyed restless murmurs and indefinable sounds of a dissatisfied audience.

He placed the puppet on the bridge and parted the curtains enough to look out into the theater. Lights from the stage reflected against the lenses of hundreds of pairs of binoculars—all motionless, all held by spectators gripped in the suspense of the plot.

They were making no noise—not that audience!

But still the sounds came . . . whispers, muffled coughs, suppressed laughter. He had no inclination to suspect the stage hands. For the timbre of the noises—the hint of restrained power — gave support to the suspicion that vast

numbers were responsible for the agitation.

He looked backstage and stared, dropping Stumpy's control bar. . . . There, in the right wing! Hundreds of faces were staring up at him. Row after row of bodiless faces that became obscure in the distance as the shadows between curtains and columns and ropes deepened.

Had he finally looked in the *right direction?*

He staggered toward the gap between the bridges of the platform. The vision of faces blurred and swam back into solidity.

But they were only batteries of spotlights, their lenses faintly throwing back the light that reached them from the stage.

Shaking with fear, he glanced down on the marionettes. Stumpy was unaware of being tangled in the wires of his fallen control complex.

But still there was no sign that the audience had recognized the unintended complications. And Hermann and Laura continued to control their marionettes, oblivious of his bungling.

"Hermann!" Craig whispered.

No answer.

"Hermann! Laura!" he said in a normal voice.

They didn't hear him.

"Hermann!" he shouted, reach-

ing out to grab the old man's arm across the bridge.

He missed, lost his balance and fell through the gap between the double platform onto the stage.

Dazed, he rose and turned to face the awaited laughter of the audience.

But there was no laughter. The spectators did not take their binoculars from their faces!

Kit, guided by Laura, glided across the stage toward Stumpy, who sat unperturbed on the divan. The doll bumped into Craig's knee.

"Laura!" he shouted, looking up into her face.

Her hand, directing Kit, moved mechanically, unaware that the marionette had gotten its strings tangled in Craig's arm.

Fighting off terror, the pangs of abandonment, he caught the wires and jerked the complex from her hand. It fell to the stage beside him.

Then suddenly he watched her eyes close as she swayed close to the edge of the bridge. She fell back and slumped unconscious to the surface of the platform.

Craig gasped.

Hermann, too, collapsed—slowly, almost drifting to the floor.

The characters they had been controlling contracted into small, grotesque heaps on the stage.

Stumpy fell over sideways on the divan.

Craig whirled to face the audience.

As one, they relaxed in their seats, their heads falling forward and their hands dropping into their laps, still weakly holding the opera glasses.

Terrified, he glanced back into the right wing.

The legion of faces hidden in the shadows looked back at him for a moment, as though surprised in the act, then underwent their metamorphosis and became batteries of spotlights once more.

He reeled and fell back against the painted backdrop that was the living room wall. It rippled and sagged under his impact.

He regained his balance and stiffened in fright.

The puppets in the play had all slumped inertly at one point—at the climax, just before Hermann, in his grotesque makeup, appeared to reattach the strings to Stumpy.

And now Hermann, Laura, the stage hands, Stumpy, all the hundreds in the audience were unconscious. Did that mean . . . ?

Shouting in alarm, he leaped from the stage and into the orchestra pit. Then he was racing down the aisle past the rows of inert spectators.

Now he could feel it again—the

impression of vastness, unlimited size all around him! As though he were alone in the blackness of space with an unrestricted view of the star-specked sphere of infinity.

The fear, the hopelessness, the helplessness that he felt were like the emotions that Stumpy only attempted to convey each time he looked up to the bridge overhead and discovered the frightening figure who had been holding the strings he had just cast off.

Only it was worse—unimaginably real!

He raced past the last seats, through the lobby, where the ushertettes lay motionless on the thick carpet, and out into the foyer.

He *could* look in the *right direction* now! He didn't suspect the ability. He sensed it with a conviction.

Terrified, he fought the impulse to see what it was to be seen.

The wall of the foyer on his right wavered and again he was looking at the pattern of symmetrically arranged faces. Only, this time they didn't metamorphose into spotlights, for there were no spotlights conveniently nearby.

He tore his eyes from them and ran out into the street.

Nothing moved.

Pedestrians lay on the sidewalk like twisted, formless ragdolls. Traffic was paralyzed, drivers bent

limp over steering wheels.

He jolted to a stop. Was it raining? He looked down the chasm between the tall buildings. Raindrops fell profusely from the sky . . . Only, they weren't raindrops and they weren't falling.

They were streaks-lines. Unbroken, straight, dangling — like strings. He squinted. They extended to the earth in groups of a dozen or more. And each group terminated at one of the motionless, fallen pedestrians!

He lunged over a woman who clutched the hand of her small child even in unconsciousness.

Panic added speed to his flight as he raced down the center of the street, weaving in and out of the stalled automobiles.

The light from the sky grew dim.

He looked up.

A vague, odd-shaped, odd-colored cloud was moving in over the sun . . . Oh *was* it a cloud?

Afraid to look further, he snatched his eyes from the frightening half-form that lurked in the general direction of the strings' origin and crashed into the fender of an automobile, falling to the pavement.

There! Under the car! The sea of intensely interested faces—all staring at him!

He struggled up and leaped to the sidewalk, trying to shake off

the indefinable horror that twisted and tore at his mind.

The faces must have been there —in a definite but obscure position relative to him—ever since he could remember . . .

He stopped and stiffened with suspicion . . . Ever since he could remember? How long was that? How far back did his memory go?

Abruptly he realized he *had no memory!* No memory at all beyond yesterday—when, in a half-stupor, he had let his cigarette fall to the floor in his dressing room!

The light grew dimmer still, but he hardly noticed it under the impact of the realization that all the recollections of his entire life—if he had ever had those recollections —were gone!

But he remembered fighting in a war, didn't he? Stupefied, he wondered whether such a remembrance actually had a basis in fact.

He concentrated. But no specific memories of being in uniform, of going overseas, of fighting came to him . . . Then, he had only the vague admission from Hermann and Laura to verify that he had been a soldier!

The suspicion welled that the reference to his wartime experience had been planted, together with a hundred other cognitions over the past two days, for the sole purpose of satisfying . . . what?—a

plot?

He started with the sudden awareness that it was almost dark now—that the daylight had been dimmed to near night by whatever it was that was obscuring the sun.

HORRIFIED at the thought of looking up again, he reeled back and half tripped over a man sprawled on the sidewalk. He fell against the building.

But the side of the skyscraper rippled and sagged under his weight! He watched the vacillation spread out like a wave along the building, upward to the observation dome thirty-seven stories high; outward to where the structure ended at the street intersection.

Now he saw that some of the people and automobiles were solid forms. Others vacillated with the building as though they were only two-dimensional components of its brick surface!

Abruptly he remembered falling against the painted canvas backdrop on the marionette stage. What was happening now was almost a recurrence of that experience!

Painted scenery!

Hundreds of hidden, tense faces!

Faces that always looked at him!

Paramnesia!

The certainty that things he had

experienced during the past two days had recurred not once, but scores of times!

The events of yesterday and to-day? Had he experienced them in their identical chronological order time after time after time? Like Stumpy had in the daily performances?

Was he only the main character in a production? Was all the reality around him — all the people, buildings, automobiles — mere props? And Hermann, Laura, Stumpy, Dr. Barron—were they but principals in a—cast?

The darkness lurched away from him now and he was bathed in a pale circle of crimson light. It seemed to come from . . . *over there!* Almost straight ahead. He squinted into its comparative brilliancy, then directed his gaze below it.

The faces again! The hundreds of faces arranged row after row after row, receding into the obscure shadows. Eager faces! Enrapt features!

An ominous rustling above!

Cowering, he was afraid to look.

A hundred gasps and murmurs of vicarious apprehension rose from the area occupied by the faces.

A shadow moved in over the pale, red light, closing in on him.

He screamed.

The scream leaped back at him, echoing from out over the lake of heads.

Then, unable to constrain his eyes any longer, he snapped his head back.

He cringed and whimpered.

Unattached strings extended down toward him—were being lowered by a hand whose tremendous proportions dwarfed the giant buildings still visible in the half-light.

Panic-stricken, he could not tear his eyes from the terrifying sight.

In the distant reaches, high above the unreal clouds, the outstretched arm joined a shoulder and the shoulder a neck and the neck a head whose features were lost in a haze of indistinctness.

Craig was paralyzed with bewilderment.

Painted scenery!

Sagging buildings!

A spotlight!

Faces—an audience!

Was he, after all, but a marionette in a play?

He laughed insanely.

It was like an illusion that receded into itself—like the trade mark on the can of evaporated milk that showed a cow's head coming out of a can that showed . . .

He finally wrenched his petrified eyes from the impossible fig-

ure, wondering whether he couldn't discern strings leading from its wrists, elbows, head to another, more gigantic, but more obscure hand, that was attached to a string that extended still further upward to another figure, held by strings in the hand of . . .

Craig laughed again. But this time it was more like a guttural whining.

He reeled and fell to the street.

And, in the whirl of madness that gripped him, the memories faded—the vague recollections of the last two days, the only retained impressions of an entire span of existence.

Slowly, one by one, the incidents were washed away, like grains of sand under the relentless force of waves on a beach.

Then he was unconscious—for a long time.

But the period of unawareness was not permanent! And, when he opened his eyes, he was no longer in the street. Instead . . .

CRAIG Conway sat rigid in his chair in front of the dressing room table, staring abstractly into the large, square mirror set in its halo of warm, bright light bulbs.

The cigarette dropped from his fingers and fell soundlessly on the rug . . .

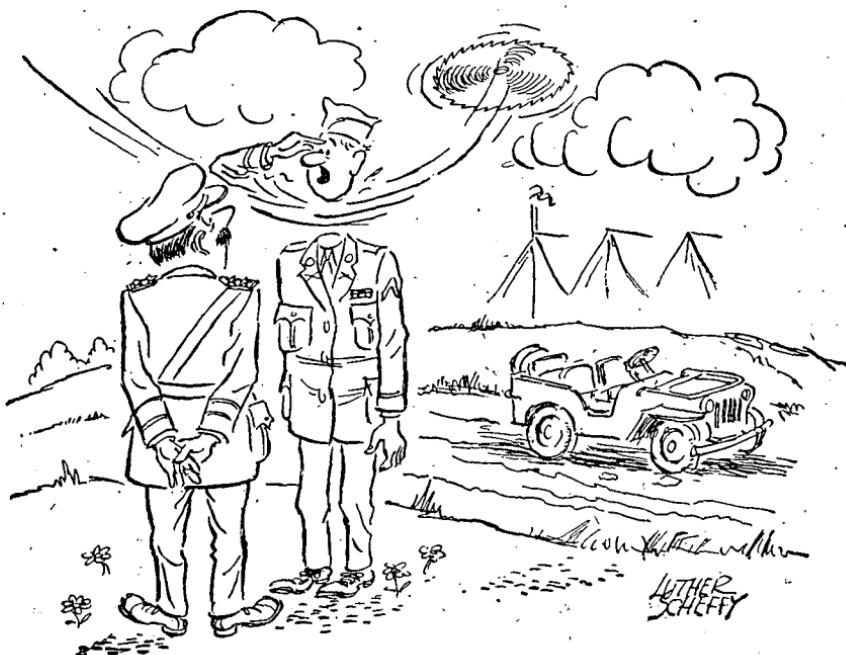
★ *No Absolute Zero?* ★

FOR a long time it was believed that if you cooled something enough, its temperature would go down to absolute zero—and at this point all molecular motion would cease; it would be energyless. Recently the super-refrigerator called the "cryostat" has caused a considerable change in scientific thinking on this matter.

Molecular motion does cease, it is true, but by no means is all the energy removed. Electron and

proton energy is still there, and the science of quantum mechanics shows that it is impossible to have matter at all without energy content. In spite of cooling substances like helium to within a ten-thousandth of a degree from absolute zero, the material retains energy and possesses such weird properties as the ability to climb the walls of containers, and the ability to diffuse through solid steel!

* * *



"I want to report a flying saucer, sir."

A particularly virulent germ-life infested the third planet of Sol. It was obvious the world had to be decontaminated. But the aliens found —

Earthmen Die Hard!

By Richard O. Lewis

THEY climbed the hill together, arm in arm. At the crest, they stopped and looked back into the moon-brightened valley where the thin needle of metal pointed skyward.

The night wind blew her dress tightly about her slim legs, and she reached a hand to her head to keep the blonde curls from whipping about her face.

He put his arm about her waist, squeezed her gently. "Only a few more hours to wait," he said, reassuringly.

* * *

The great ship from beyond the Galaxy drew alongside the tiny planet, matched its orbit, cut its drive, and drifted slightly toward the lone moon. The ship was nearly as large as the planet itself, but there was no interchange of gravity between the two bodies, for the ship was of a substance made beyond the stars.

Inspector Ryt looked at his sky

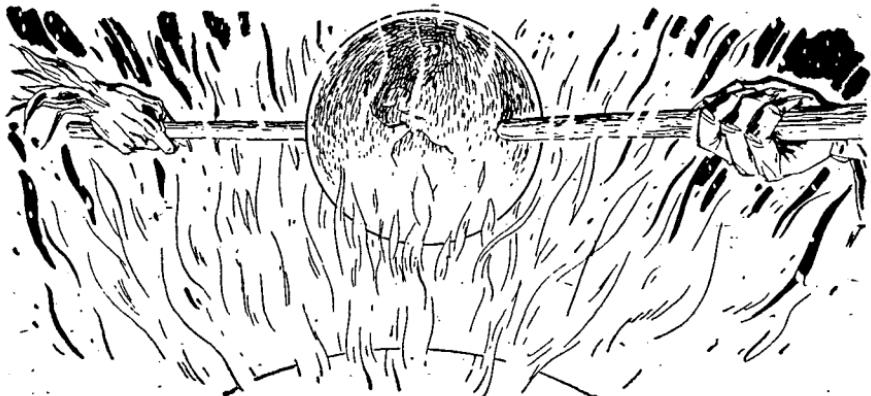
chart. Yes, it was Sol III. Then he looked through the port hole at his left and adjusted the lens. Then he swore by the Seven Sister Suns of Sagittarius.

The lens showed him the moonlit side of the planet. There were lights there, little rows of lights forming checkered patterns in various areas. And there were other lights, greater lights which flickered viciously among the patterns, leaving squat, circular clouds above them.

Ryt's cheeks puffed out in uncontrollable wrath. "Contaminated!" he bellowed. "And they are warring on each other!"

He turned from the lens, his gross body glowing in red anger. "Krembyl!" he screamed. "Krembyl!"

The door at the far side of the room swung open, and the entity called Krembyl fluttered in. "Yes?" he asked, his body trembling at the manner in which his name had rung



out.

"Your records show Sol III as sterile. Decontaminated!"

"Y-yes, sir," Krembyl stammered. "I—I took care of it myself. Just a—a few days ago . . .".

"Look!" shouted Inspector Ryt. "Look for yourself!"

Krembyl went hesitantly to the lens and adjusted himself before it. He saw the sparkling lights below, the flashes, the tiny clouds, and his body went pale pink with the shame of defeat. . . .

"I—I am sorry, sir." He turned from the instrument, his pale pink fading to an ashen gray. "I just don't understand it. I have renovated the planet several times . . .".

"Several times?"

"Why, y-yes." Krembyl hurried to a shelf of documents along one wall, scanned the titles briefly

selected one, and returned to the desk. "Here it is, sir. You will find my reports quite in order, sir."

"Damn the reports!" snapped the inspector. "I want to know why this planet hasn't been cared for properly!" He darkened his body with a scowl.

KREMBYL fumbled the document open, flipped a few pages. "Here it is, sir. All written down, sir. All in correct order, sir.

"*Cosmos 66, 9238*," he read. "Malignant growth noted.

"*Cosmos 67, 9238 Decontamination process begun*.

"*Method: Entire planet encircled with electrical impulses which caused hydrogen and oxygen to unite into a heavy liquid. Process continued for a full 40 of planet revolutions.*

"*Result: Planet covered with the*

liquid to an average depth of 30 fathoms. Contaminating element, being oxygen-breathing, could not possibly exist under such conditions."

"Fool!" barked Ryt. "Some of them probably floated to the surface on some of the buoyant vegetation. They may even have made rafts of the vegetation. Or a boat!"

"They are exceedingly persistent and adaptable, sir," Krembyl admitted. "And there were other times . . ." He broke off to fumble through the documented account. "Yes, here it is, all written down in correct form . . ."

"Damn the reports!" snapped the inspector. "Tell me what happened!"

"Well, sir," said Krembyl, scanning the pages carefully, "it was back in 9237. I noticed the malignancy and took proper measures. I took the planet from its orbit and into an area remote from the Sol unit. There, in the intense cold, the polar caps grew larger and larger until they finally extended over the land portions. Even the middle belt became frigid. Then I swung the planet back near Sol and let it soak in tropical heat. I subjected the planet to this treatment three—or was it four?—times before placing it back permanently in its orbit."

"Dolt!" said Ryt. "They pro-

bably hid away in deep crevices. Probably remained alive through the treatment by eating each other!" He looked at the unhappy Krembyl for a devastating minute. "You should have used fire. *Burned them out!*"

"But I did, sir!" Krembyl said, hurriedly. "I did!" He fumbled rapidly through the pages. "Here it is, right here! All written out!"

"Nebula 42, 9235. Persistence of malignant contamination noted . . ."

He broke off abruptly as the inspector's body turned to brittle ob-sidion.

"H-m-mm . . . A-hh . . . Well, sir, finding them confined in an area of particularly lush vegetation, I burned them out, chased them with fire into arid regions, and swept the garden of plant growth completely away where they could not find it again."

"But it is obvious that you failed! Even if two of them succeeded in escaping . . ."

"And before that, sir," Krembyl hurried on. "Before that, I shook the land masses violently, rent great fissures that permitted the gasses and flames to leap out from the central core and spread destruction. I submerged huge infected areas into the depths of the seas, and brought up new land masses, fresh and clean, into the light of

Sol. I even . . . ”

“Enough! Enough!” Ryt hit the desk before him a ponderous blow. “Silence, fool, while I think!”

KREMBYL turned a sickly shade of green and let the document close in weary hands.

Sol III had been a particularly painful lancet in his side, even more so than had yet been guessed. He hoped the inspector would probe no deeper. But even as his hopes kindled, they became but ashes.

“There are a few more things I do not understand about this,” Inspector Ryt was saying. “When this planet was formed from the elements of space, there was no contamination. It was virgin. And, yet, it is now contaminated. Why?”

Krembyl felt his innards churning fearfully. His whole body was so filled with trembling that he could not bring himself to fashion words.

Ryt’s body grew blacker in the silence. “Why?” The word was lightning from the Stygian depths. “WHY?”

Krembyl’s body rent asunder, and the effort of reknitting himself so weakened him that his voice was scarcely a whisper. “They—they came from Sol V, sir.”

The thunderous blow upon the desk top mingled with Ryt’s below of fury. Together, the sounds shook the room and nearly disin-

tegrated Krembyl’s hastily reassembled body.

“Dolt! Ass!” screamed Ryt, his body assuming the blackness of the dust cloud of Orion. “You failed to stop them on Sol V! You not only let them blow the planet into tiny bits, but you also let them escape to Sol III! And here all your efforts of extermination have failed again and again!”

He wheeled to look through the lens again. Three brilliant flashes, greater than the others, sparkled almost simultaneously upon the planet’s troubled surface, sent up mushrooms of dust and shattered atoms. “And is this what happened on Sol V?”

“Y-yes,” stammered Krembyl. “The same thing. Just before . . . just before . . . ”

He could not bring himself to complete the statement.

Ryt leaped from the seat at the desk, his body black and bloated. “Then there is not a moment to lose! Exterminate before this planet is destroyed! And let none escape!”

“But, sir,” pleaded Krembyl, “I have tried everything—fire, floods, ice . . . ”

“Then try something else!” Ryt roared.

Krembyl drifted slowly towards the door.

“Wait!”

Krembyl stopped obediently.

"What about Sol IV?"

"Oh, Sol IV is all right, sir." Krembyl brightened a shade as he turned. "There is not the slightest trace of contamination. That planet must have been on the far side of Sol when—when they escaped Sol V. I am certain, sir, you will find the rest of the system quite in order"

"Enough! Bégin the extermination! And this time employ drastic measures. Take the planet to the rim of Sol itself and bake it to a crisp before they infest the entire galaxy."

"Yes, sir. Immediately, sir." Krembyl turned again to the door, thankful his fate had not been worse.

"And don't fail this time!" warned Ryt. "If you lose Sol III as you lost Sol V, I'll see to it that you put them both back together again, piece by piece, if it takes you six eons beyond your retirement age!"

* * *

THE moon, with its strange accompanying cloud, had nearly set. The blue of the eastern sky was fading into apple-green. There was a roaring swish of sound, a shattering blast of energy, a whistling sigh, then a remote whisper. The needle-like structure from the valley became a flickering pin point in the sky.

The girl leaned her blonde head against the shoulder of the man beside her. "We—we are free?" Her voice was but a whisper.

He adjusted the ra-vis to get a clearer view of Earth and its surrounding space. The view was but slightly distorted by the hot gases of the stern tubes. "Yes," he said, struggling to keep his nervousness from playing havoc with his vocal cords. "Free. Free from a mad world!" He squeezed her hand reassuringly, his eyes intent upon the screen.

Something had gone wrong. The earth had slid to one edge of the screen. He readjusted the ra-vis. The space-cloud of black that had hovered near the moon that night had also shifted its position. It was now between the earth and the sun, and the earth seemed to be following it The furrow between his dark brows deepened, but he said nothing.

"Just think of it!" she said, her voice a song. "Mars! And a brave new world!"

He put an arm about her shoulders and took his eyes from the screen. It was absurd to think the earth was moving sunward. It was probably merely due to some space aberration

"Yes," he said, picking up her enthusiasm. "And after that—the stars!"



Kohler

"In the name of interplanetary good will, Stanton,
kindly stop calling him 'little old four-eyes!'"

Kuru stood his ground bravely as the ship flamed down from the sky. Truly this was a great and terrible moment. He must warn his people to —

Beware The Star Gods

By

S. J. Byrne

KURU paused, his stone knife poised above the half-skinned kill. He listened, at the same time twitching his sensitive nostrils in an effort to read the messages of the wind. But there was nothing in the air for his nose to read. Rather, it was sound that gave him warning.

He stood up and looked through the trees at the small valley beyond the ridge on which he stood. He could hear the raucous cry of birds and the tree people.

Kuru wanted very much to run to his people, but if he should do so what would he tell them? That he was running from that which he had not even looked upon with his own eyes? That Kuru ran from the cry of birds and tree people?

Now the tree people saw him and they paused in their flight, concentrating their numbers in the trees over his head, looking down at him and chattering and gesticulating with their busy little furry

arms. He was aware that they recognized him as a hunter and the enemy of the murder-beast, and he was proud, knowing that they were appealing to him now in the face of this new and greater enemy, whatever it was. He could see that they were pointing at the sky.

The sky! Only the gods lived in the sky! He felt the hair along the base of his neck stand out stiffly.

Something great and terrible was coming out of the sky!

THE thing was long and rounded and shone brightly like the stars. It sparkled in the blue-white light of the triple suns like a love-stone brought from the Faraway Caves beyond the Great River. And it was floating down on pillars of fire toward the valley. It was becoming bigger and bigger, as were Kuru's large, black eyes.

Fear began to give place to Kuru's wonder. How had such a



thing ever come to be? And what was it doing in the sky? What was it?

It was big, far bigger than Kuru could have imagined. When it came to the ground it crushed and burned dozens of great trees. And there it sat, motionlessly and without sound, as though a mountain had dropped from the sky to stay there forever.

Suddenly, in the shining surface of the great-sky-jewel a long, black hole appeared, and even as he watched something glittering began to emerge from it. At first it seemed that this was some sort of gigantic cocoon, breaking open to release the wing of an unimaginable insect. But in another moment he received the biggest surprise of all.

"Men!" he gasped. "What are men doing in that sky-jewel? They could not have made it and come out of the sky—unless they are gods!"

The "man-gods" wore strange garments. They were amazingly frail and beautiful looking people, like women in their fairness of skin and their almost complete lack of hair on their bodies. Kuru felt that he could have broken one of them with each hand. But what strange strength of magic did they possess to make this shining cave that brought them from the sky?

He heard a ferocious roar which emanated from the region of the sky-cave. It was a murder-beast. He saw several of the "man-gods"

run to a gleaming sort of fence at the edge of the wing that had extended itself out of the black hole. They were looking downward.

Now here was something Kuru could understand. In the face of the terrifying murder-beast he would be able to tell whether or not these people were weaklings. He saw one of them extract a small object from his garments. When this small object was pointed downward in the direction of the roaring murder-beast, a thin, bright line of light appeared below it, and the murder-beast's roar was cut off.

Kuru's teeth chattered slightly. Undoubtedly, he was looking upon the representatives of a race of gods. They could command the powers of lightning.

Still, he could not run away even now, because only a female would come screaming home to tell of what she had merely seen from afar. A hunter like Kuru, who was already a respected member of the family council, would investigate and have something more to tell other than how frightened he was. On the contrary, he must show how brave he could be. He must get closer to the sky-cave of the gods and watch them for a while . . .

* * *

"Infra-red picked it up. It's something pretty big, over in that tall tree. Been there since before sundown."

"Hmmm . . . Patience, cunning,

warm-blooded, large size. Do you think—”

“Now don’t let’s get back on that again!”

“But Henderson said he saw one with his binoculars, up on that ridge, early this afternoon.”

“Good God, Frank! Can’t you realize you’re being victimized by an old complex? Why is it we *have* to find human beings on other worlds? We’ve been searching the stars unsuccessfully for more than a millenium.”

“This is our farthest reach out into the galaxy—”

“Yeah. By God, it’s almost six hundred light years, twenty years by chronology, and two for us even under trans-C time contraction. *That*, my friend, is some traveling!”

“It’s a beautiful planet—just like Earth was supposed to be once. You know, sometimes I think civilization is a disease.”

“That’s a *great* idea! So we’re microbes infesting the universe!”

* * *

THAT night Kuru returned to his family, which consisted of his father, his mother, his father’s three other wives, his two sisters, his five younger brothers, half-sisters, half-brothers, and dozens of uncles and aunts and scores of cousins numbering one hundred and twenty-two males and females. Council members from three neighboring “families” had already gathered on Coun-

cil Rock, because some had seen the shining thing descend out of the sky. But only Kuru could tell them facts about it, which added tremendously to his prestige.

“It is a flying cave they have built,” he concluded. “They are gods from the country of the sky.”

“This must be true,” said Bortu, his father. “You say they killed a murder-beast with lightning?”

“As though it were a crawly-bug under their feet.”

The elder members of the council and the younger hunters all looked at Kuru in silent admiration. But admiration was mixed with fear. The stars above them were big with mystery and wonder. Why had the gods come down to visit their world?

“What do they want?” asked Gurgo, the father-chief of the Snake Lake family.

“I do not know. I heard them talking among each other, but it is some strange twist of tongue that makes no meaning.”

Now Fulkudu, father-chief of the Cloud Valley family, rose to speak. He had thrown the sacred white fur of the river-cat over his shoulder, which meant that his was an official decision.

“We must appease these gods,” he announced. “We must show them at once that we are friendly to them. A sacrifice must be presented.” Whereupon, he sat down again and was silent.

The rest of them remained silent, too, because this recommendation

gave rise to a much more important question. If the other father-chiefs agreed with Fulkudu, then someone would have to go to those powerful gods and present the sacrifice. No one wished to be embarrassed by having to confess his fear. Who would be brave enough to take the sacrifice to them?

As though by common accord, all council members slowly concentrated their attention upon Kuru. Words were unnecessary to express the general idea. Kuru was a very brave hunter. He alone knew more about the gods who had come from the sky than any other among them.

Kuru looked into the eyes of his father and saw the message written there. He had made his father proud. To back out now was to lose all the prestige so far gained. Kuru thought of the thin bolt of lightning that had killed the murder-beast, and he fought to keep his teeth from chattering.

Slowly, he stood up, throwing his own white fur over his brawny shoulder. "I will present the sacrifice," he said. And his own voice sounded strange to him. It was hard to believe he had said such a brave thing as this.

DERLA!" Kuru exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" He lowered the heavy horny-head beast to the ground and looked at his sister in amazement.

She was almost his own age, and the prettiest female in the family,

with her long black hair and her large black eyes and firm young breasts. He, himself, had killed the murder-beast whose fur encircled her shapely hips.

"I would be with you in this danger," she answered, pleadingly. "None of the other males dared to go with you. Our father's pride would be complete if a female of the Great Cliffs were as brave as Kuru."

"But you must go back. I do not know what these gods will do. They may kill me."

Derla ran forward to her brother's side, placing her hands on one of his hairy arms. "Then this is a greater reason for me to be with you, brother!—so that your spirit will not travel alone into the sky country."

Kuru looked down into his sister's eyes and grinned. "You are my favorite sister," he said. "Come! Perhaps when they see you they will not think of killing!" He shouldered the horny-head beast again, and the two of them continued across the floor of the valley toward the shining sky-cave of the gods...

* * *

"MOTHER of God! Frank!"

"What is it?"

"Seeing is believing. Look down there in that small clearing . . ."

"Oh no. It can't be!"

"Well, you were the guy that was saying they might be here!"

"What I need is witnesses then. I'll signal general call. You get cameras and the recorders out!"

BY God, it's incredible—yet it's true! The first extraterrestrial humans ever discovered, in over a thousand years of space exploration!"

"This will be something to stir up their blood back home. People were beginning to lose interest even in galactic exploration. This is it, boys! We've finally discovered our own kind!"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that... Those are obviously primordials. That male is half hair."

"And the other half is all brawn. The female is surprisingly clear-skinned. For a primordial gal she isn't bad!"

"What are they doing down there? Looks like they're waiting for us to do something."

"Don't you get it? We're from the stars. Therefore we're gods. That quadruple-horned goat-like animal at their feet is a sacrifice. We're supposed to accept it."

"Hell, we'll accept them all! Let's get 'em on board!"

"Hold it a minute, men. Keep your voices down. You're gods now, not monkeys. Take it easy. Can't you see how the female cringes behind the male? Both of them are half scared out of their wits. By their own evaluation, they are brav-ing death to do us honor. We have to gain their confidence."

"Well, if they're defying death,

itself, maybe they'd come on board if we lowered the ladder to them."

"We can try it, but let it down slowly—and smile! Remember, you are benevolent gods . . ."

* * *

"IF they intended to kill us, Derla, they would have done so by now. See? They smile at us!"

"Look! Something is coming down!"

"It is a shiny-fence."

"It is like the vine-steps for climbing cliffs."

"That's it, Derla! Either they are coming down, or—or—"

"Kuru! They want us to come up!"

The two of them stood there in the small clearing, looking at the vertical shiny-fence that had come down to them from the great ledge where the man-gods stood, up at the top of their sky-cave. Again, Kuru's great muscles twitched with the instinct to run. Had he been alone, he might have done so. But in the eyes of his brave sister he could not do this, even though it might cost him his life. Still, the god-men looked very friendly. They were beckoning to him to come up.

Gritting his teeth and emitting a low growl to give himself courage, Kuru threw the horny-head beast across his shoulder and approached the shiny-fence. "You stay here," he told his sister.

"No, Kuru! I will come behind you, no matter what happens!"

He shrugged, ashamed of his own fear in the presence of her surprising courage. He grabbed cross-pieces of the shiny-fence and began to climb, knowing that Derla was close at his heels.

The great, smooth ledge with the shiny-fence around it was larger than he had expected. A group of twelve man-gods stood there, waiting for him. None of them, he noticed carefully, had a lightning stick in his hand, although at least five of them carried the terrible weapons at their sides. After pausing once to make sure that he was not to be attacked, Kuru climbed up onto the ledge and threw his sacrifice down. Then he turned to help Derla up. The two of them stood facing the people from the sky.

Finally, Kuru said to them, "We bring you sacrifice and make peace. The gods are welcome to this land."

Derla tugged at his arm. "We should bow down," she advised.

Brother and sister fell to their knees, with bowed heads.

* * *

That ought to make a good picture for you, Henderson. They're eating out of our hand already!"

"Here, fellow, get to your feet. You too, black eyes!"

"Don't forget the sacrifice. Better accept it so's they won't be offended. Besides, maybe it's edible. We could do with some fresh meat.

—maybe."

"Maybe is right. I don't think my system could get used to real steaks again. That looks like some sort of goat. May be just like mutton."

"Hey Frank! That cave girl sure goes for you! Look at her take you in with those big eyes!"

"Guess that's because Frank's more their size. Open your shirt a little more, Frankie old boy. Show 'em the hair on your chest!"

"Shut up, you guys. Do you realize what this means?"

"Yeah. Love at first sight!"

"Men! Pipe down. Whether you like it or not, this is quite a historical moment. Now the first problem is one of communication and contact with the rest of their people."

"We could get out the flier and take them home."

"That's right. We'll do that when we've tried talking to them and taken some more pictures and recordings. What do you make of that fellow's language, Ken?"

"Primitive, but with a pretty good smattering of syntax. There were some definite inflexions. I'd say they were about ready for writing."

"By God, that guy must have the strength of a gorilla. This sacrifice animal weighs a ton. Give me a hand, Mike."

"Where I come from, that expression he's wearing is a snarl. But

I guess he is trying to smile. Well? Who's going to shake hands? Okay, Frank. You be the hero."

"You'd think he'd never seen a hand before! He's afraid to touch you. No, he's going to—"

"Ouch!"

"Yipes! If he can hurt Frank then I'm not shaking hands with him! I'll shake hers, though. They say women used to go around like that in Bali."

"Now just take it easy, men. I think that hairy fellow is doing a splendid job as it is. Can't you see how nervous he is? He's broken out into a sweat. He's watching us like a wild animal. Instinct is struggling with intelligence. Don't make any quick moves. You'll notice he keeps watching our guns as though he knew what they were for. That's pretty good observation. He'll probably jump the first one who draws, so just remember that . . ."

"They're getting in because they saw you two get in, but they may not know it's a flier. The minute you take to the air they may get panicky. So watch yourselves! We'll follow in the other two rigs. Take it slow, because we want to catch some aerial fotos of the terrain . . ."

Say listen, Frank. These people have been entertaining us all for a week. We've found a perfect, utterly peaceful world that has never known war or privation.

It's the biggest find in history, and here you sit moping. I haven't seen you smile once since we got here. What's eating you?"

"I think you just hit the nail on the head."

"What do you mean?"

"We have found a perfect, utterly peaceful world that has never known privation."

"So?"

"Remember what I said about civilization being a disease?"

"Oh, so that's it! Well, they don't seem to object to the contamination."

"How could they? We're wonder gods, and our gadgets are magic toys. What do they know about the rest of it? In forty or fifty years the colony ships will arrive here and set up shop. There'll be scientific development, mass production, regimentation. Just consider the implications of bringing an alarm clock to this world!"

"That's pretty good, squeezin's they make out of those roots, but don't let it make you morbid, old boy!"

"Within two generations those rugged brutes will be helping us build factories here. They'll be wearing work clothes and numbers. Our society is necessarily collective because of past history and possible future dangers of aggression among ourselves. What do these people need collective security for?—and mass production—only to feed us as we come in among them and spawn more millions who will soon

make it necessary to expand again and find another world like this to spoil!"

"Frank, you're going off your rockers. Oh! Oh! Here's something to take your mind off of social philosophy. Look at this!"

"What cooks? Looks like a delegation of all the best looking women in the tribe. Guess they're going to dance for us or something."

"There's Dark Eyes again. She's got you picked out already."

"Picked *out*?"

"Sure! Ken said he thought this would happen. They've made several overtures before."

"What are you talking about?"

"Children of Paradise, pal! They think this is the truest form of hospitality, and in a way—"

"You mean—!"

"Yeah. That's what I mean. And Dearborn says we shouldn't offend them. So what am I going to do?"

"But—!"

"Don't keep Dark eyes waiting, pal!"

* * *

"YOU were only supposed to please the gods, not fall in love with them, Derla."

"I love only one."

"I know. It is the big one who never smiles except when he looks at you and me. Then he smiles with sadness. But he is not liked by the other gods. I have seen him argue with the others and shout at them and wave his arms about—and they

have stopped smiling at him. If he is in disfavor, it is dangerous to have anything to do with him. He carries his lightning stick at all times, and I know it is because he fears attack from his own kind, not from us. You must stay away from him."

"He does not seek me. I fail to please him."

"He is a god and you are woman."

"But Sigala, and Bulbini—"

"I know. Some of the gods have been lonelier than the others. That is the only reason."

"The big one who is called Fronk—has not yet—"

"It is just as well."

"Not even that night when we first—"

"Derla, you will have to forget about him and stay away from him."

"But he was kind. . . ."

"And he is not liked by the other gods. Your father forbids it!"

* * *

"FRANK, this obsession of yours is getting serious. The men have asked me to have a talk with you. If you don't get hold of yourself it might even mean the brig, man. Now I want you to tell me just what's behind all this."

"Well, sir, it's just that I think we're dead wrong in coming here at all. What we ought to do is protect these people from civiliza-

tion. We discovered them. When we go back and report it, they will be the property of modern materialism. Our supposed gifts to them will be nothing short of exploitation. I say we erase our discovery from the records."

"What?—I can see now why a couple of the boys had a fight with you. It's insane! For over ten centuries we have looked for other humans—"

"And now that we've found them, we plan to force them into our own way of life, as though we had found the only answer!"

"Frank, I'm sorry to put it this way, but this is an order. Keep your personal opinions to yourself. You're on probation and you're going to be watched. Dismissed!"

* * *

"THE big one has stones in his head, Derla. Look at him up there on the clifftop. He has grown a beard. Each day he looks less a god and more a man. But he drinks *qaral*-juice too much. He stays away from us and he stays away from the other gods. What is the matter with him?"

"I do not know, Kuru. He is very strange. Beautiful things make him sad. I know when he is sad, because then he really drinks and goes away to sleep it off somewhere."

"What do you mean—beautiful things?"

"Well, it is when we are happiest

in the mornings when the suns are still too low in the sky to drink the dew from the leaves and grasses, when we bathe in the river and laugh and play. Or when many of us sit around the great fires at night and listen to the old ones' stories. He watches us then, and he drinks, and after a while he goes away. He is very sad."

"Soon they will all be gone. I saw them bringing many things to the sky cave . . ."

"I will be sad to see them go."

"You will be sad to see the crazy big one go."

"Yes. There is something in his eyes—a kindness that is for all of us—and there is even something in his eyes for me."

"You believe in the things you wish for. But that does not make them true."

"Kuru. Where do you think they go?"

"Now *that* is a question for a woman to ask! Is it not obvious? They go into the sky, whence they came . . ."

ONE morning the large families of the Great Cliffs, Snake Lake and Cloud Valley were startled out of their sleep by a shaking of the ground and a blinding light in the sky. Before they could rub the sleep out of their eyes, a giant, invisible hand swept over the country, bending trees almost to the ground. And then a terrible roar smote their ears. They did not know if the gods of the mountains had

spoken or if this were some new manifestation of powers on the part of the sky gods who were soon to depart. When they saw the angry cloud and the fire in the sky they fell to the ground, trembling with fear, and praying. They did not know how they had angered these strange new gods, but there could be no doubt that they were angered.

Hours later, when the angry cloud began to fade away in the sky above that valley where the sky cave was located, the father-chiefs and hunters gathered at Council Rock.

"Our bravest hunters must go to appease them with great sacrifices," announced Bortu. "They must go at once. And my son, Kuru, will lead them."

So it was decided. The fattest horny-head beasts were killed and skinned. Kuru and nine other hunters shouldered their sacrifices and started toward the Valley of the Gods, as it was now called. Over three hundred members of the three great families stood on the Great Cliffs and watched them go, hoping that the gods would not destroy them in their mysterious wrath.

Suddenly a great cry of alarm arose from the watchers. The hunters paused on the edge of the forest. Before them stood the sky god, the big crazy one with the beard. The one called *Fronk*. In his hand was a lightning stick, and he pointed it at the hunters. He made signs to them which were unmistakable. They were not to approach the Val-

ley of the Gods.

Derla could not help it. She ran across the intervening space and stood beside her brother, Kuru, staring at the god she loved, in desperation and amazement.

He was crying. His face and his beard were streaked with tears. He was crying, almost screaming at them—but he would not let them pass . . .

* * *

"I didn't mean to kill them! Mother of God, why didn't you take me instead! Only wanted to cripple the power so they'd be stranded . . . All right! Keep back! You, too, Dark Eyes! Those sacrifices mean nothing now, boys . . . Just a smoking pit back there filled with radiation. But what would you know about that? Thank God now you'll *never* know! That's the first and the last mushroom cloud you'll ever see. Go on back to your Paradise. Maybe you'll never know I saved it for you . . . Go on! Beat it!"

* * *

"**H**e killed all the other gods, Derla. In his madness he destroyed the great sky cave, and now not even he can return to the country of the sky."

"I don't think he meant to kill the others. He cried for days about it."

"And got terribly drunk! We had to stop giving him *qaral*-juice. It was making him sick so that he could not eat, and he grew thin."

"But he has been gone for many, many suns. Do you think he is dead?"

"He is a god. Perhaps he will never die. He went away because he knew we were afraid of him. In fact, he is not welcome in any of the families."

"He is a lonely God. I have made up my mind, my brother. I am sad because he is sad. If our people will not comfort him then I must. I am going to him. I will try and

make him a happy God once more."

Derla turned away from Kuru then and walked into the dark forest. Kuru watched her go and then shook his head. "You are a strange one, my sister. But go to your God. You will never be happy unless you do." He shrugged then and turned his thoughts to other more important matters.

And Derla went to find her God. She was eager, and happy...

THE END



"Bemis! Have you seen my hair tonic?"

The Scandalized Martians

by

Arnold Marmor

David Fry wanted to make an epic movie in the realistic school. The trouble was, his ideas wouldn't pass the censors — here or anyplace else!

DAVID Fry was a realist. And also slightly crazy. Maybe that helped in this buggy-business but David Fry overdid it. "I want her nude," he screamed. "Naked."

"Impossible," I informed him as calmly as I could.

"Naked," he bellowed.

"The Breen office won't allow it and you know it."

"I defy them. Those radicals! It'll be my most realistic picture. A milestone in film making."

"It won't get the seal of approval."

"So what? I don't need it."

"Every state will ban it."

"Nevada won't ban it."

"Besides, you couldn't get Harriet Desmond to strut around in the raw."

"Oh, no?"

"No."

"Her option comes up in three months."

"So what? You're a director. You have nothing to do with it. That's Dwight Howard's department. Look, David, I'll have her in a slip or a bathing suit."

"Ronnie," he said, shaking his head. "I like you. You're a writer but I like you anyway. I feel that the audience will get the proper impact only if she's naked."

"It'll be an impact all right."

"You write the script the way I tell you. I don't want to argue anymore. I like you, Ronnie."

"If you want a sexy script I'll make it sexy without being lewd."

"Sexy? Don't be vulgar. I want a down to earth picture like the French and Italians make. I want to surpass them with my realism."

"David, what good would it do if I did write the scenario your

way? The scene would never be shot."

"Enough," he screamed. He clutched his chest. "I feel an attack coming on. Leave me. Get out."

DWIGHT Howard was chief production man at Silver Studios. He listened gravely as I spilled my heart out to him.

"He's a great director," Dwight Howard said. He was a large man with tiny ears, liquid blue eyes, and the cigars he smoked cost a buck a stogie.

"Sure," I said. "A great goofy director. He's nuts just like all directors."

He grinned at me. "Directors believe all writers are crazy and writers believe all directors are crazy."

"You want me to write the script his way? You want that scene shot with Harriet Desmond nude?"

"No, no. Of course not. The whole idea is too ridiculous for words." He sighed. "I'll have a talk with him."

David Fry resigned the following day. Tortured and abused actors and actresses celebrated for three days and three nights. Dwight Howard didn't have to accept the resignation as Fry was bound to Silver Studios by an iron clad contract. But a director's work gets

sloppy if his heart isn't in it. So out went David Fry, the realist.

Nobody in Hollywood heard from Fry in seven months. And nobody seemed to care.

One night, as I came home from a party, I was greeted by the screaming of the telephone. I held the receiver to my ear. "Maternity hospital," I said.

"Ronnie." It was David Fry.

"Oh, Hello. How's everything?"

"Fine. Great. I've got to see you."

"Well . . ."

"I'll hop right over."

He hung up and I sighed. I built myself a solid drink and got comfortable.

He showed up twenty minutes later. He was thinner, more nervous than before.

He flopped on a divan. "You wouldn't believe it," he said.

"Believe what?"

"I want to do a picture. A science picture about a trip to Mars."

"It's been done. And more than once."

"With real Martians?"

I blinked. "I'll get you a drink."

"No. I want a clear head. Hear me out. I've met them."

"Who?"

"Martians. A whole gang of them. Real honest to goodness Martians. It's fantastic. But it's true."

They landed in the San Fernando Valley."

"That figures."

"I've got my home there. They asked for directions to Hollywood. You know what? They came to revolutionize the industry."

"Maybe they're Commies?"

"You should see their equipment. Fantastic. I talked them into staying over at my place. They dismantled their ship and have it stored away. I want you to do the screen play. It'll be great."

"They . . . er . . . weren't detected flying over?"

"They use an anti-radar beam."

"Oh."

"They can speak every language under the sun."

"Look, David. I'm tired and I want to go to bed. So be nice and go sober up."

"You don't believe me?"

"No. In plain language, no."

He extracted a square shaped box from a pocket. "See this gadget? I can make myself disappear."

"Do that."

And he did.

"Yow!" I screamed.

He reappeared.

I staggered to the liquor cabinet and made myself a double triple whiskey and soda.

"Well?" There was a look of triumph on his face.

"They give you that?"

"A present."

"I've got nothing doing for a week. I'll be there tomorrow morning."

"No. Tonight. You're liable to blab about it."

"Don't you trust me?"

"No. I know you went to see Dwight Howard about me."

"Then why do you want me to write the story?"

"I feel you owe me that. You're honest in some ways. Well?"

"Right. I'll pack a grip if I'm staying over."

"Do that. I've got my car downstairs."

DAVID Fry's home was a Spanish-style ranch, which consisted of a herd of cattle and horses.

The Martians looked like us except they had no necks and no finger or toe nails. Their leader was a giant of a Martian with the name, Dooma. They wore slacks and sport jackets which Fry had bought for them. They seemed pleasant enough.

I got some sleep and woke that afternoon. Dooma, Fry, and myself sat in the front room and talked over the story we were to do.

"We can't trust anyone," Fry said, "so you and I will play the

earthlings in it. We'll land on Mars and discover life on the planet. Dooma and his crew will play the Martians. Real type casting."

"What about sets?" I asked.

"Plenty of background on Mars," Dooma said.

"What?" I exploded.

"Sure," Fry said. "We'll go to Mars and shoot most of the picture there. Has anyone ever done that before?"

"Sure," Dooma said.

"I mean anyone on earth," Fry said.

"I don't like it," I said.

"We'll bring you back," Dooma said.

"I still don't like it."

"And we'll do that nude scene," Fry said. "We'll have a couple of Martian girls taking a bath nude."

"Oh, no," Dooma said. "That's out."

"But why?" Fry wanted to know.

"The Martian Censors. They won't go for it."

I grinned. "There too?"

"But I want to film life in the raw," Fry said.

Dooma shook his head. "Out of the question."

"We'll do it my way," Fry snarled, "or we won't do it at all."

Dooma stood up. "Well if that's the way you feel about—"

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Hold on. David, we've got a great thing here. Don't mess it up."

"I'm the director," Fry screamed.

"Nobody is going to tell me, my business."

"Is everybody in Hollywood like him?" Dooma asked me.

"Some of them are worse."

"I realize we made a grave mistake."

"I made the mistake of taking you into my home," Fry shouted.

"I treated you like human beings. And this is the thanks I get."

"I won't hear another word." Dooma turned and marched out.

"Now see what you've done?" I was as mad as a wet hen.

"What have I done? All I wanted to do was make a great picture."

"You insulted him. Why, he's liable to go back to Mars and talk them into invading us."

"That idiot. What does he know about making pictures?"

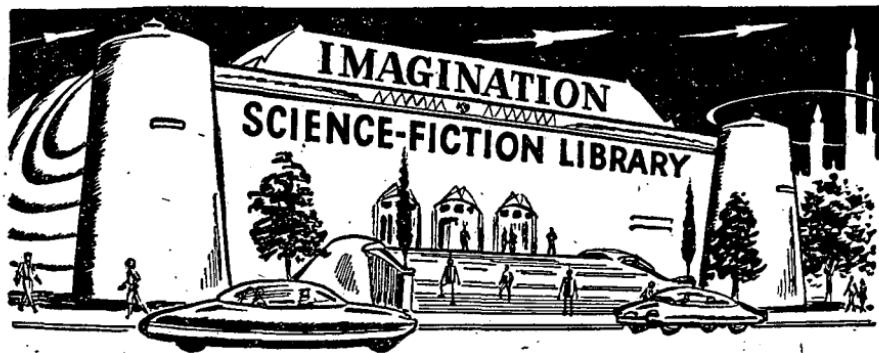
Activity brought me to the window. I looked out and saw the Martians putting their ship together.

Fry came up behind me.

The ship blasted off and the Martians went back home.

"They were hammy actors anyway," Fry rationalized.

THE END



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

A MIRROR FOR OBSERVERS

by Edgar Pangborn. 222 pages, \$2.95. Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York.

Things of the highest excellence are as rare in reviewing science-fiction as they are in most other human endeavors. Hence it is with genuine pleasure that this reviewer recommends *A Mirror for Observers* for this book is that rarity, entertaining, exciting, moving, erudite—alive with action and ideas—in short, a superb piece of writing!

This story is conclusive confirmation of the postulate that a new plot is both impossible and unnecessary to the success of a good story. And it also confirms the fact that what matters above all is first-rate writing. Consider the familiar outlines: Earth and Earthmen—in a way—are property.

This is the Earth of the near future. Elmis is a Martian Observer, one of many who have been here for millenia, guiding, helping, meddling. And of course there are the Abdicators, less sympathetic than the Observers. The activities of both center about a highly probable boy-genius, Antonio who is destined to change the world.

These are trite ingredients, even hackneyed, but they've been stirred with Pangborn's pen and from the moment you've read the introduction which sets the Martians' roles, you're caught. From these trivial beginnings the world flares into an incredible—no!, a credible struggle of the first order. This reviewer hasn't read Pangborn's other book, "West of the Sun", but he will after enjoying *A Mirror For Observers*.

SPACE TUG

by Murray Leinster. 223 pages. \$2.50. Shasta Publishers, 5525 Blackstone St., Chicago, Ill.

It is not a coincidence that "juveniles" seem to have taken over the best of science fiction and science fiction writers. Evidently writing a juvenile science fiction novel requires the author to review his conceptions of what realism in space is like, to re-examine with fresh eyes the often hackneyed ideas he's used. Whatever the case, you can frequently rely on s-f written for the younger set more soundly than you can on its bigger brother.

Here is an excellent example. Leinster's adult fiction is somewhat

tiring. But in this simple tale of a youth and a space station, an element of exciting newness appears much as if Leinster had said mentally, "What can I say refreshingly and with vividness?" His own answer is this book, the story of a young space pilot ferrying materials to a threatened space station.

The first step from the space station is to the Moon and Joe Kenmore is determined that Men will get there despite the threat that menaced it from the Earth below.

Simply, realistically, and with breath-taking excitement the story builds up. It will make science fiction come alive once more for you!

SECOND FOUNDATION

by Isaac Asimov. 224 pages. Gnome Press, New York, N. Y.

It was with difficulty that this reviewer read this book and with even more difficulty that he wrote this review; certainly it will bring down the wrath of Asimov fans.

Isaac Asimov is an educated, articulate man, but he is neither a writer nor a story-teller. Heavy-handed and ponderous, Asimov grinds out ream after ream of elephantine prose about his ridiculous "Galactic Empire," filled with endless philosophizing, (on a juvenile level) obscure sociological fantasies, and massive technological monologues.

Hari Seldon, Bayta Darel, Han Pritch and Arkady Darel skitter about the Galaxy, involved in improbable activities in the improbable "Second Foundation" fighting

desperately to save themselves from the villain to end all, the "Mule."

Second Foundation is a sort of modern Graustark. Asimov's preoccupation with kingdoms and empires would have been quite fitting four decades ago, but now . . . What connection this has with science-fiction is hard to understand. Asimov's stories are the "soap opera" of science fiction. Not to be compared with the excellent "space opera" of Doc Smith or Campbell some twenty years ago!

You might say, "Stop the vituperation—what's the story about?" I'll answer, "Princesses and kingdoms, empires and galaxies and fairy godmothers. Even Mules! In short—nonsense!" Read it if you must, but don't say that you weren't warned — it's not a good book!



Conducted by Mari Wolf

HAVE you read any old magazine science fiction lately? The ones of which I'm thinking are those that were published in considerable numbers during the thirties.

It's not only the paper that has aged. The stories seem archaic, with a tempo that's quite foreign to anyone familiar with modern science fiction.

The science fiction of today, by comparison, is less concerned with the physical environments of the future than with the human adaptations to them. The conquest of the planets and the technologies that lead to the stars give way in emphasis to the people transplanted to a life on the unearthly environment of planet or moon or starship. The stories tell of the conflict of human beings under the influence of environments not native to the race nor even to ancestral species; they tell of the social conflicts of human beings in the far future when the

ancestral home may even have been forgotten.

Many facets are deeply explored which, yesterday, were merely exploited for their story value. The relationship of man to his mechanical offspring, the robot, is one. The relationship of man to his hereditary but hardly human offspring, the mutant, is another. The story of man meeting his distant cousin, the humanoid or non-humanoid alien, is still another. But there are many stories in which the characters are limited to men, and men's problems, in settings which instead of being physically alien are either earthlike or the Earth itself.

These stories are varied. There are too many alternative futures, when seen from the vantage point of today. But these stories are, in the whole, unified. Considered from any viewpoint, that of speculation or scientific background or literary value, or most important

of all the sheer ability to capture attention through entertaining, these stories, in general, are superior to those of yesterday. They're more true to life, more thought provoking. They stress more important concepts.

Or should we say, concepts that are more important to us?

For, in large part, does not the same criterion we have set up for historical romances and the history books hold true for the possible future histories that science fiction portrays? We write of the future, but the aspects of that future we choose to write about are those that interest us in the present. The best stories, of course, concern universal aspects; perhaps the only way to tell if a story be great is to wait and see if it endures. The basic ideas of much of the best modern science fiction, man's relationship to himself and to other men, are found in all ages. But the stuff that sets science fiction off from other forms of fiction is found only within its own field, and often only within its own generation.

Many of the science fictional worlds are, in part at least, Utopian. The writer chooses his form of government, of social and economic and psychological relationships, and sets his story in the world of these elements. Or he may choose to 'show' the negative Utopia of what will happen if trends that he fears should come to fruition.

These created worlds are, it seems to me, definitely concerned with the present, with mid twentieth century Western man, who displeased with today and reject-

ing an unscientific yesterday strides forth into the unknown future, wielding the two edged sword of science.

The problems that the science fictional characters contend with are, after all, the problems of the mid-twentieth century; and the ways chosen for solving these problems, whether by an electronic pseudo-divinity, a far reaching psychological conditioning, or the evolution of superman, are actually mid-twentieth century ways.

Aren't there many beliefs of modern science fiction that are taken for granted by writers and readers alike? Advance of technology and science is only one. Racial equality is one. A much more complete equality between the sexes is another. World government is another. These, and many other fundamentals, are not stressed in the stories of the far future; they are held to be implicit.

They weren't always implicit. I remember earlier stories that carried racisms and sex antagonism and rampant nationalism to the stars, and thought it quite natural to do so.

Of course, today's science fictional worlds don't follow the conventions of today. The relationships between the characters in a story about the future are seldom those that you'll find stressed in the love pulps or the detective stories. Each writer sets up his own conventions in his stories; but it's surprising how similar many of these conventions are, and how similar, in basic motivation, many of the stories are.

It is an interesting thought, and one of much too great scope to de-

velop here, that the writers most ardently admired, and most angrily attacked, are those who deviate the most from this convention-of-the-future, whose stories are in contrast, not only to the world of today, but to the more commonly imagined worlds of tomorrow.

As for the actual world of tomorrow, its motivations are likely to be as different from ours as ours are from those of the occupants of a medieval monastery, who sought the things of the spirit, or those of the Greeks, who scorned technology as fit only for slaves . . .

Now to the fanzines:

* * *

PSYCHOTIC: 10c; monthly; Richard E. Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Apt. 106, Portland 12, Oregon. In the eyes of some, having a top fanzine means a lot of money to spend, money for photo-offset processing, elaborate covers, professionalism in format and style. Since many superior fanzines come in expensive wrappings, the reader might almost be tempted to believe the myth about cash outlay equaling quality.

As remedy for this attitude, I suggest a look at *Psychotic*. It's printed in purple ink, cover and all, and it doesn't even have justified margins. But it's one of the best looking fanzines you'll find (largely on the strength of Geis' very well drawn and *uncluttered* covers) and it's certainly way up at the top in reading quality.

What fiction Geis runs is not only readable, it's different. I'm sure you'd like the character of Ron Smith's and Hubert Summer's "The Glob," for example.

V. L. McCain, in his column,

"The Padded Cell," writes on what qualities make a fanzine great. His thesis: the editor should be himself, not water down his ideas in order to please every possible reader.

Psychotic is one fanzine that definitely isn't watered down.

* * *

ANDROMEDA: 30c; U.S.A. subscriptions, Dave Rike, Box 203, Rodeo, Calif. The editor of this one is Pete Campbell, 60 Calgarth Rd., Winderemere, England. He started it with the slogan "Every Issue Bigger," and so far every issue has been bigger than the previous one. The one I have here contains 54 pages, and these pages in turn cover quite a variety of fan material. The price is, I think, too high for a fanzine; but it's only a quarter if you subscribe and that's fairly standard among big fanzines.

There's the beginning of a serial here: James Keeping's "Unethical Equation." Much as I don't like serials in fanzines, I liked this one, and I hope I get the issues containing its denouement. The ethical question in point is, who has the right to the last water on the planet: its vegetable, highly intelligent inhabitants, complete with race memory; or the Earthmen? The solution: the plants bud and die; the Earthmen take the water and the buds (race memory and all) back to Earth. What happens? I dunno. End of installment one . . .

Alistair Ferguson writes an extremely humorous tale of time travel and the movie making world in "Spurious Time." Very good issue.

* * *

QUESTION MARK: 15c; in the

United States; Mervyn R. Binns, 4 Myrtle Grove, Preston, Victoria, Australia. ?, as its title appears on the front cover, is the latest arrival from Down Under. It's a good looking mimeoed fanzine, with a printed cover dominated by the one symbol title. In content it is strangely reminiscent of some U. S. fanzines of about three years ago—articles on Dianetics, its theory and practice, are stressed in its pages.

Also there's some varied fictional and non fictional fare. Among the fiction, J. K. Booth's "True or False," relates the old paradox implicit in the statement, "all men are liars." He gives the statement to an electronic calculator, in a slightly different problem . . .

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. Here, in the newspaper of the science fiction world, you can find out all about the latest books, TV, radio, the movies. Professional and fan activities alike are covered. There are reviews of new magazines, editorial changes, local and national Conventions, overseas happenings.

Fantasy-Times is an accurate newszine, very readable and as reliable as any publication in the field. It's quite invaluable if you want to keep up with stf.

* * *

KAYMAR TRADER: 10c; monthly; K. Martin Carlson, 1028 3rd Ave. So., Moorhead, Minn. Here's the fanzine you'd want to read if you're in the market for back issue stf or fantasy magazines and books. You'll find, among the collections offered here for sale, just

about everything from weird to fantasy-adventure to science fiction. And if you happen to have such material for sale, you'd do well to advertise here.

M. McNeil gives capsule reviews of old magazine stories that are fictional in nature. The 1903-1905 Argosy stories that he describes in this issue seem quite interesting indeed, with their old, old plots and themes.

* * *

STAR ROCKETS: 10c; Raleigh Evans Multog, 7 Greenwood Rd., Pikesville 8, Maryland. First thing you notice about this issue is its Psychotic type cover. . . . Yes, Geis contributed it . . .

There's quite a complete review section in *Star Rockets* — fanzine reviews, book reviews, reviews of prozine first issues. There are Convention reports, including coverage of the first science fiction convention back in 1936, also in Philadelphia.

There are fiction and poems, including Jerry Anthony's limericks and his poker game story. The limericks are quite amusing, if you like that kind of thing. All in all, this is a fannish type zine, done for fun, and not to copy the professional field . . .

* * *

ZANY: 5c; Larry B. Farsace, 197 N. Union St., Rochester 5, N. Y. Here's a new fanzine by an old time fan who is just recommending activity in the world of amateur science fiction. The first issue, which I have here, is quite small; but like so many of yesterday's fanzines it is very well written, well mimeoed, and different in approach from

most of the newer zines.

Farsace is the first person in a long time to refer to science fiction as pseudo science—and so it was once commonly called. An author friend of mine, who writes Westerns for a living, always used this terminology, and in my neophyte enthusiasm I used to get very annoyed and argue with him. Now, I can chuckle with Farsace over the term, and almost agree . . .

Anyway, I like reading *Zany*.

* * *

B R E V Z I N E ADVENTURES: 10c; bimonthly; Warren A. Freiberg, 5369 W. 89th St., Oak Lawn, Ill. This is a fiction fanzine, and most of the stories are by the same group of writers. You might even say that Alexander Rothlands, Robert G. Warner and company form a sort of *Brevzine* stable.

The mag seems to take itself very seriously, ballyhooing each writer and each story, not to mention itself, to the skies. Possibly editor Freiberg is being facetious, but he sounds as if he really believes his own blurbs, and is convinced that he's putting out The Great American Fanzine. Ah, well . . .

In this issue Alex Rothlands writes "The Story Telling Organism," or, as the heading puts it, a sequel to Edgar Allan Poe's "Tell Tale Heart." There is, actually, a certain hint of Poe's writing style all through this fanzine—long descriptions building toward suspense, mood writing, the horror endings. But, I fear, it's not turned out in quite the way Poe would have handled it; the Freiberg stable lacks winners.

* * *

CANADIAN FANDOM: 20c for the 10th Anniversary issue or 4 issues for 50c; quarterly; Gerald Steward, 166 McRoberts Ave., Toronto 10, Ontario, Canada. This fanzine has had a long history—5 issues during its first year, followed by an average of not quite two issues a year, with periods of quiescence and others of activity. Now it seems fully active again, covering a wide range of subjects, from Convention reports to the history of the Rosicrucians.

In this issue V. H. Earle writes on "Understanding Women," or a male's analysis of what women say and do. I don't think he understands the feminine viewpoint too well himself . . .

Marvin Snyder's article on "The Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis" is very interesting, especially to someone who knows of the organization only through its magazine ads. Part 2 of the article should be equally informative about this ancient society.

* * *

MOTE: 5c; bimonthly; Robert Peartrowsky, Box 634, Norfolk, Nebr. In this humorously slanted little fanzine you surely ought to find a nickel's worth of amusement. The cartoons are funny; the satire is even sometimes satirical (and that's rare enough in a lot of fanzines, where the humor is laid on with a steam shovel).

Hal Shapiro, who previously wrote on how to get fans to contribute to your fanzine, now writes on "The Art of Refusing," or how to escape writing for someone else's.

There is also Rich Lupoff's ar-

ticle on Ray Palmer, written apparently some months ago, in which Rich emerges as a prophet of sorts . . . All in all, an amusing zine with an amusing cover, and one that's lots of fun.

* * *

SPIRAL: 10c; bimonthly; Denis Moreen, 214 9th St., Wilmette, Ill. This mimeoed fanzine runs quite a few columns and articles. Charles Lee Riddle tells of the history of his zine in "Five Years of Peon", and Ray Thompson in his column "Phrenitis," discusses Joel Nydahl's fanzine "Vega." Art Kunwiss writes of a world where fanzines are forbidden, though why they're banned he never states.

It's interesting reading if you know the people concerned, but if you're an outsider to this segment of the fan world you'll only get bewildered here.

* * *

S-F FANZINE: 10c; Sam Johnson, 1517 Penny Dr., Edgewood, Elizabeth City, N.C. This one is mimeoed, with a photo offset cover. It's quite fannish in tone; many of the stories seem to be trying for the punch-ending effect so common in fandom. (Stories that depend on the O'Henry ending are most common in most amateur writing; the O. Henry ability to get away with it isn't.)

Fred Haney's "The Effect of the Acti-Fan on the Neo-Fan" tells of one fan's conversion to science fiction. Jerry Hopkins in "History Lesson," and David English in "Pluto Must be Heaven," try their hands at fiction. And Raymond Clancey runs some verse, pretty good, but not his best by any

means.

* * *

SPACE TIMES: monthly; Eric Bentcliffe, 47 Alldis St., Great Moor, Stockport, Cheshire, England. The American price listed is \$1 for twelve issues, so I imagine that it would be a dime for one . . .

This is the publication of the Nor-West Science Fantasy club of Northwest England, that is. It contains a wealth of material. There's J. Stuart Mackenzie's "Acceleration at 1G," which is the type of article you'll usually find in an amateur rocket society journal, not a fanzine. There is also, in a different issue, just about the funniest story of the first space voyage I've ever read — and Arthur C. Clarke himself writes it. It's called, "How We Went to the Moon," and it's not only a terrific satire on the space opera but a rapier thrust at the serious rocket club, science first you know . . . A tale to keep.

Eric Bentcliffe's science fiction news column, "Animal, Vegetable or Alien," is always interesting, and you'll find in every issue a well balanced reading fare of humor, verse, serious columns, and British satire.

* * *

That's all for now. Next month there'll be more fanzines in the Box; with the different zines following different publication schedules the same group rarely appears together. Remember, if you have a fanzine you want reviewed send it to me, Mari Wolf. *Fandora's Box*, IMAGINATION, P.O. BOX 230, Evanston, Ill. See you next month.

Mari Wolf

Letters

from the Readers

IRRESPONSIBLE THINKING?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Mr. Sabsay's letter in the March issue was quite rational and objective. He said that a Space Station put up by us or the Russians would be regarded as a war threat by either. Now, I do not deny that as an American I would feel more "comfortable" for a time if our government had it first. But this alternative—"the Russians or us"—is a way of putting it which ignores the objective realities and is quite misleading.

Everything has stepped up to an increased tempo and intensity. We are talking about life and death, war and peace in a world-wide way now. We cannot afford to be irresponsible. Or careless. Therefore your reply to the letter becomes somewhat a serious matter. It reflects an opinion which is too emotionally one-sided.

Your "would you rather . . . ?" is not a little abstract question. This isn't the 19th Century, nor can we think in terms of a dramatic

"our good, fine American government will save the world."

So?

My point is that a United Nations Space Station would not—could not—be a war base, nor a competitive area. A world, however, with two space stations—one American, the other Russian—would be a dangerous place to live in. To quote Mr. Sabsay: "Under a joint administration the likelihood of war would be much further away than under one-sided management."

In your reply you stated that: "You infer that the best way to maintain peace today is to give your enemy the best weapons you have! This would be much the same as putting a loaded pistol to your head and daring someone to step up and pull the trigger!"

What weapon? What trigger? Where is there a trigger the whole United Nations can pull?

Your analogy is incorrect and not thought out. While it is obviously well intentioned and on the surface (Before Bombing) patriotic, it is also near-sighted and sub-

jective as to be almost fanatical and undemocratic. Is the rest of the world not important to your way of thinking? If the Space Station were a United Nations possession would you feel so "unsafe?"

When I read such glib nonsense as your reply I was riled enough to write this letter. It's not a little mistake in logic, a misquote, or even a sour note I wish to correct. It's irresponsible thinking. Like the one that goes: "Let's drop the bomb on them first!" Or do you feel sympathy for that stupidity too?

Bess Hecht
67 Eighth Ave.
New York 14, N. Y.

We're not attempting to get embroiled in a discussion of international politics, but in order to properly reply we may have to. It is perfectly true that people throughout the world are concerned with their individual liberties—and that the United Nations was set up as an international council table in regard to them. However the bald truth of the matter is that only two countries in the UN are in a physical position to affect peace or war: the USA and Russia. The USA, of course, strives for peace. Unfortunately peace is not always gained by discussion as recent history has proven. Our country has had to fight for it—but always as a defender, not aggressor. What do you think would happen to the other countries in the UN if the USA were strictly isolationist? Who could stand up to Russia? The issue at point here is a Space Station and who should control it. You say the UN. We say you're living

in a dream world if you think that would maintain peace. What's to prevent Russia from taking it over from the UN in a sneak military move? Could the UN prevent such an occurrence? Did it prevent the Korean War? A United Nations is practical only when the nations involved adhere to a code of honor—unknown in Communist countries. That's why we maintain it would be putting a loaded pistol to our collective heads. The Reds simply cannot be trusted; they've proven that. It's not a question of the whole UN pulling the trigger we hypothesized. It's a question of one country—Russia—pulling it. At best we'd be risking suicide to prove the point. It's true we're highly patriotic and believe that communism is the devil's gift to man; we also recognize that the only chance the rest of the world has for peace is the continued supremacy of Uncle Sam scientifically and otherwise. You can bet your boots the day Russia surpassed us would be the day before a new Pearl Harbor—on a world scale that would make Hitler envious. Russia sits at the UN and says one thing, but what actually comes out of the Kremlin is entirely different. Trust these characters with a Space Station? Not on our life—which is exactly what it might amount to. The big point as we see it is that a Space Station can be man's stepping stone to the stars. The USA would consider it as such; Russia, we feel, might be more inclined to make it a stepping stone to all of Earth—before the stars. . . . Should we drop the bomb first? If we had done so in 1945 after Hiroshima

and Nagasaki the world would have been spared much turmoil—including the Korean War. But you forget, the USA is not an aggressor nation, even though we have the power to be. We use our power for defense of liberty, not enslavement. You call our thinking irresponsible. Is it irresponsible to look out for the safety of the rest of the world—and fight for it if necessary? As long as we're tagging thinking, we feel yours is rather naive. You can't go petting a mad dog and not risk a rabies bite. Just one last thing: You recommend a USA developed Space Station be turned over to the UN. What if Russia beat us to it? Would they turn it over? Huh? wlh

WHO'S CORRUPTED!

Dear Mr Hamling:

Comes a letter by Mr. Pierce in the March issue. If I didn't believe that everyone is entitled to his moral opinions I could get a good laugh out of the letter. As a teenage (gwods, but I hate that word!) girl let me assure him that very few teenagers are being corrupted, shocked, or even embarrassed by naughty language. I certainly don't feel myself being corrupted.

Actually, it is all a matter of opinion. Call it morals, or religion, it is still based on opinion. Religious concepts cannot be proven to those who do not believe. Morals are based more on current standards of society than on any fixed and lasting laws.

The absolute purists (for omission of all slang from printed matter) who believe as Mr. Pierce

does, are far in the minority. They are entitled to their opinions, but they have no right to attempt a "reform" job on any publication. And you have no obligation to do anything other than putting out a good, entertaining magazine!

Jean Courtois

318 East Commercial St.

Appleton, Wisc.

Second the motion wlh

MEDALS FOR ALL . . .

Dear Ed:

In your March issue editorial you suggest that we invent a new medal to award to the first men in space. In my opinion there should also be one presented to the personnel involved in the building and launching of a space ship!

The short articles after some of the stories are a unique feature in Madge. I look forward to more of them in the future. And before closing I'd like to say that I rank Madge among the top four in stf. The other three being *Galaxy*, *If* and *Astounding*. Hope Madge continues to improve each month!

Jack Zeitz

1300 Medary Ave.

Philadelphia 41, Pa.

Okay, Jack, medals for all the boys, but a very special one for the guy who actually tracks the perilous unknown beyond Earth . . . wlh

A SPECIAL BRAVERY

Dear Mr. Hamling:

The editorial in the March issue of *Madge* brought to mind a gem of a story that appeared in the

June 1952 issue—THE RELUCTANT HERO by Daniel F. Galouye.

The cold, near-unbearable fear of being the *very first* human to set out to reach Luna! The inner turmoil, the terrible twisting desire to call the whole thing off—battling fiercely with the iron determination to stick it out!

What tough fibre will have to be in the makeup of such a man. Indeed he will possess a special kind of bravery, one that will win the respect, admiration and plaudits of all mankind.

Alex Saunders

34 Hillside Ave., W.
Toronto 12, Ont., Canada
You'll live to know his identity,
Alex. The next ten years? . . wh.

THE HIGH AND LOW OF IT

Dear Ed:

Imagination has never been *Astounding*.—Very few short stories in *Madge* have made me shout, "Great Galaxy!" But I have never missed an issue and I haven't been disappointed. *Madge* has been regular with her selection of good novels, fair novelettes, and short stories.

Understand now, I think that both *Astounding* and *Galaxy* are excellent magazines. There are numerous others on the market. But *Madge* (who started that nickname?) has a regular way of coming out month after month with readable, enjoyable stories.

And that, I believe, tells the story.

To provide a good example, look at *Other Worlds*. *Other Worlds*



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hit some high marks during its three-year life. And, let's be frank, some all-time lows. *Other Worlds* folded. *Ditto Vortex*. The same holds true for *Science Fiction Plus*, *Rocket Stories*, *Dynamic*, *Space Science Fiction*, *Science Fiction Adventures*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Orbit*, *Science Stories*, and the list continues to grow these days. It seems to me that science fiction is grasping at straws. Too few magazines offer the public good reading. For example, I saw the death and life of science fiction last night.

I was sitting on a stool in one of our local drugstores when a man walked over to the magazine rack and picked up a science fiction magazine—a pulp. He flipped

through it, and laid it down. His friend grinned and said, "What's the matter? Thought you used to read it?"

The man replied. "Yeah, but there isn't anything to interest me anymore." He then bought a western.

But his friend bought the pulp stf book. And I heard him say as they both walked out, "If it's interesting I'll read it tonight."

So I say, let's continue to be regular with *Madge*. Let's have enjoyable stories all the time. (The magazine in question was not *Madge*, incidentally.)

James Lewis
Rt. No. 4
Trenton, Tenn.

Madge got her nickname from Forrest J. Ackerman, long-time fantasy enthusiast. You can rest assured that *Madge* will continue to be "regular" in the future as she has been in the past. You think we want to be included in the obituary column? We much prefer to remain at the top level of popularity—and knowing our girl, she will! . . . wlh

WHAT YOU SAID!

Dear Bill:

I do think Mr. Pierce is being rather prudish and unjust in his criticism of *Madge*'s use of occasional slang words. The dirty, bewhiskered spaceman, suddenly stubbing his toe while out on a binge between space hops, is not likely to exclaim, "Oh, my goodness gracious!" Instead he would cry out every oath under the sun. For that is realism.

And, paradoxically, even science fiction must be realistic.

I do wish someone would explain to me what is so "feethy" about the word "Hell". Ooooooh, what I said!

Cover on the March issue was one of *Madge*'s best. And your cartoons are the best in the field.

Martin S. Jukovsky
50-06 31st Ave.
Woodside 77, L. I., N. Y.

Careful, Martin, or we'll have to wash your mouth out with Venusian zukol. But come to think of it, that would be a hell of a thing to do—oops, we said it too! . . . wlh

WE IS ALL DOGS!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I am not in the habit of criticizing science fiction mags, be they good or bad, but a situation has arisen whereby I cannot contain myself. *Madge* is going to the dogs!

Stories which have been printed in *Madge* recently wouldn't be fit for the lowest pulp. I refer especially to *TYRANTS OF TIME* in the March issue, which was easily the poorest science fiction story I have ever read. *THE COSMIC JUNKMAN*, *THE TIME ARMADA*, *NO SONS LEFT TO DIE!*, and *PERIL OF THE STARMEN* in previous issues were just as bad.

One bad novel can be set down to a mistake, but the lead stories in *Madge*, with few exceptions, have been getting constantly worse. How did you have the nerve to print such drivel in a mag that, for a time, ranked at the top? Not only the novels are degenerating,

but the novelettes and short stories as well.

Please, before it's too late, do something to put Madge back in the top position where it rightfully belongs.

Gordon Pape
101 Des Erables
Cap-de-la-Madeleine
Quebec, Canada

Hey, now, all those stories you mentioned weren't that bad, huh? You pack a mean bite, son, so pardon us while we crawl into our kennel and do some wound licking. In the meantime we hope forthcoming issues restore your faith in good old Madge with

HIS MARK OF QUALITY

Dear Mr. Hamling:

To let you know how I rate IMAGINATION I'll tell you how I go about selecting which stf magazine to buy.

I first look at the cover to see whether it appeals to a stf fan or a sex addict. This eliminates 90% of them from my buying list.

Next I check the authors to determine an issue's caliber.

Final factor, I run down previews of stories in the few left.

These three rules apply to every stf magazine except IMAGINATION and GALAXY. The only thing that could keep me from buying them is that I might already have a copy!

Ronald Christensen
752-15 St., N. E.
Mason City, Iowa

Our wound is now healed! . . . wh

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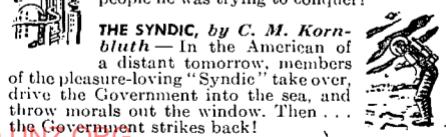
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